

THE EDGE AWARDS ISSUE
EDGE
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
CAN INDIE GAMES SAVE THE WORLD?
WITH WATTAM, KATAMARI'S CREATOR LEADS A NEW WAVE OF DEVELOPERS ON A MISSION TO FIX AN INDUSTRY IN CRISIS
#315
FEBRUARY 2018



It’s a spiritual thing. A body thing. A soul thing

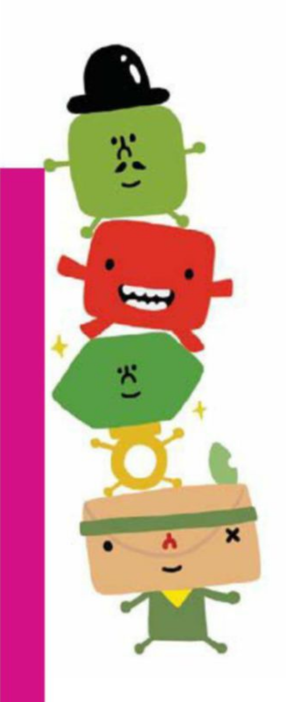
Ask any independent developer about Keita Takahashi or his games and they’ll tell you a different story. Capy Games’ Nathan Vella has a running joke with him, for instance, which involves the *Katamari Damacy* man (and co-designer of this issue’s cover) begging him for a job every time he sees him. Tommy Refenes, co-creator of *Super Meat Boy*, recalls the night he popped his *Katamari* cherry; visiting a friend in Amsterdam, he’d sampled some of the local herbal remedies when he sat down to play Takahashi’s bonkers roll-’em-up. He laughed his head off. The next morning, sober as a judge and sceptical, he loaded it up again – and had the exact same reaction.



Takahashi, Vella and Refenes are just some of the independent game makers we spoke to while researching a very different kind of cover story. It is about Takahashi’s new game, *Wattam*, certainly. Yet it is also about the state of the indie scene more broadly – and how it fits into a wider game industry and a world that, we believe, have never needed small, experimental, meaningful, honourable games more.

The year 2017 was a cracker for videogames, certainly – something we celebrate elsewhere this issue in The **Edge** Awards. But it ended badly, and left us questioning our own editorial standards. At the positive end, *Odyssey* and *Breath Of The Wild* reminded us of what games have to do in order to earn an **Edge** 10. But in hindsight, were we right to devote valuable magazine space to, say, *Star Wars Battlefront II* at the preview stage, when the final product turned out so badly? How might we have used that space in Hype to better serve our readers, bringing you word of a game you’d never heard of that we believed you’d be excited about?

It’s a question we’d been thinking about for some time, even before a host of indie luminaries told us that the biggest problem facing them today is simply getting the things they make noticed. We realise we can play a role in fixing that – and so, as educated game-players, can you.



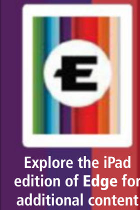






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Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future. Distributed by Marketforce, 2nd Floor, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU.



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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).
www.futureplc.com

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Winter of content

A rush of December events ensures one of gaming's greatest years goes out with a bang

While we might have phrased it differently, you have to admit Josef Fares has a point. The director of *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons* and the forthcoming *A Way Out* gave December's The Game Awards what UK viewers of a certain age might describe as its Jarvis Cocker moment – the bit where a guest goes wildly off script and ends up stealing the show. Host, and event organiser, Geoff Keighley's face was a picture when, during a light-hearted interview about Fares' EA-published adventure, his guest turned to him and asked, "Can I swear here?" After Keighley gave him the nod, Fares turned to the camera and shouted, "Fuck the Oscars!" And again, and again, and again, his middle finger extending as he somehow became even more animated.

Fares is, by his own admission, "passionate". But this was something closer to lunacy, and by the end it was all a laughing Keighley could do to get him off the air. By then he'd also issued a half-hearted apology on behalf of EA ("All publishers fuck up sometimes") which must have gone over well at the publisher's Redwood Shores HQ. Still, it was hard to disagree with Fares too strongly about an event that goes from strength to strength every year. The Game Awards managed something no other game-awards show has ever managed: it felt prestigious.

Production values were lavish, with a live orchestra belting out medleys of videogame themes (including a wonderful turn from vocalist Kate Higgins, capping off the night with a performance of *Super Mario Odyssey*'s insta-classic Jump Up, Super Star). Many attendees were in black tie, and award-winners blinked back tears during their acceptance speeches. Okay, sure, it didn't quite touch the Oscars for glitz and glamour, or worldwide attention. But every year Keighley and his crew are getting closer to giving the videogame industry the celebration it deserves. The 2013 show, seemingly broadcast from an apartment-building stairwell and helmed by a deeply sarcastic Joel McHale, seems an awfully long time ago.



Geoff Keighley, host and organiser of The Game Awards

There were mis-steps, of course, and not just the ones involving Fares. There are far too many award categories on the ballot – a process in which, in the interests of transparency, **Edge** is involved – and Keighley was forced into tacitly admitting as much when he rattled, on multiple occasions, through a handful of awards in a single breath. And the whole thing carried a persistent veneer of corporate involvement, though in fairness that's the cost of doing business when you're trying to build a show of this scale from nothing. As an awards show it was a resounding success; opening up the process to a public vote often results in the most popular games winning instead of the best ones, but there were few head-scratchers. Game Of The Year went to *Breath Of The Wild*; producer Eiji Aonuma and director Hidemaro Fujibayashi deservedly hogged the stage throughout the night, even when they weren't accepting another award. Aonuma dramatically drew a mocked-up Master Sword from a stone, and the second DLC for *Breath Of The Wild* was announced and released during the ceremony.

Production values were lavish, with a live orchestra belting out medleys of videogame themes

Ah, yes, the announcements – in years past, the only reason to stay up and suffer through the show formerly known as the VGX Awards. Despite the increased emphasis on the pomp and circumstance of the awards show, new game announcements came by the high-profile bucketload. Heading the pack was *Bayonetta 3*, a Switch exclusive revealed in one-more-thing style by Reggie Fils-Aimé; the first two games are coming to the console in one package early next year, too. Rick And Morty creator Justin Roiland unveiled his studio Squanch Games' debut, the mad VR adventure *Accounting+*, which will be available by the time you read this. *Soul Calibur VI* debuted, and *Firewatch* developer Campo Santo announced the intriguing Egyptian adventure *In The Valley Of Gods*. FromSoftware teased its next game – and we really do mean teased. For all the ostentatiousness, the notion of company president Hidetaka Miyazaki flying halfway round the world to watch a 30-second whisper about his new game was probably the most opulent sight of the evening.

The highlight of the night, in terms of new games at least, was *Death Stranding*, for which Keighley, thanks to his enduring friendship with Hideo ▶





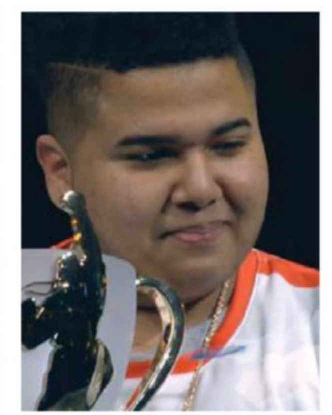
***Breath Of The Wild* won three awards in all, with Best Action/Adventure and Best Direction joining the coveted Game Of The Year gong**





ABOVE **There was nothing new of *The Last Of Us Part II* at PlayStation Experience, though a 'meet the cast' panel kept the hype train rolling.** RIGHT **Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* continues to baffle and intrigue**





ABOVE **Saul Mena, winner of Capcom Cup.** LEFT **It was a quiet PSX for *Spider-Man*, limited to a short behind-the-scenes video**

CHINA RISING

The Game Awards thrives on a little eastern promise



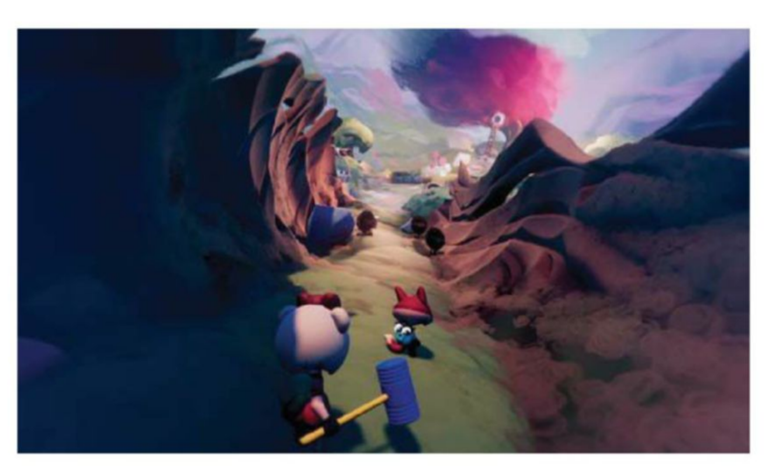
The Game Awards were beamed live to countries all over the world, but none had as dramatic effect on viewer numbers as China. As we reported in **E**310, the country offers tremendous potential to the global game industry; viewing figures tripled year on year, to 11.5 million. On social media, the show had the beating of all live TV and sport in the US, and was the top trending topic worldwide; on a smaller scale an option for streamers to co-broadcast the event reaped similar dividends. But China was the key, and a new award category – Best Chinese Game, naturally – was a price well worth paying.

Kojima, practically has the exclusive broadcast rights. The result? Ten more baffling minutes of the *Metal Gear* man's next game, this time featuring allies being pulled down into the ground by invisible aliens, and a crying Norman Reedus with a foetus living down his gullet. God knows, in other words.

Mark Cerny's confirmation that *Death Stranding* is up, running and playable – and actually makes sense after five or six hours, which is probably a personal best for Kojima – was one of few headlines to come from an expectedly muted PlayStation Experience, which kicked off shortly after The Game Awards came to a close. Hot on the heels of a busy Paris Games Week, Sony had admitted that PSX would be more of a fan celebration than a stop on the press tour, and so it proved. In fairness, PSX has long felt like a community event that the industry also happens to attend; it's an opportunity for fans to get their mitts on the demos that the press played earlier in the year, and to get closer to the developers they revere.

Sony duly obliged. A tenth-anniversary celebration of the *Uncharted* series gathered creators and voice actors – there was no sign of series creators Amy Hennig or Richard Lemarchand, sadly, but this was an affable display of affection for PlayStation's biggest star. Elsewhere, Sucker Punch staff sat down to talk about the studio's samurai action game *Ghost Of Tsushima*, while Insomniac and SIE Santa Monica did likewise with *Spider-Man* and the imminent *God Of War*. The star, however, was *Dreams*, the sprawling Media Molecule game-cum-creation-tool that Sony has obviously, and understandably, struggled to market effectively – to the point that some thought it dead. Well, not a bit of it. *Dreams* is still real and looks astonishing; you can expect much more on these pages in due course.

With no traditional press conference – Sony's headline livestream was a fireside-chat-style series of discussions and interviews – the worldwide audience naturally came away disappointed. But as at Paris Games Week, Sony's line-up of playable games at PSX once again showed a line-up of commendable breadth and variety. By keeping the big hitters off the show floor, attendees were given no option but to engage with a line-up of indie games and VR experiments that they would otherwise have ignored so they could spend four hours in the queue for a known quantity such as, say, *Spider-Man*. And they got much closer access to the people making the big games as a result. Okay, the panel discussions may not have yielded much in terms of news – *Ghost Of Tsushima*'s charted the game's journey from concept to announcement, while *The Last Of Us Part II*'s introduced the voice cast and very little else. But it's the right way to structure a fan event like this, taking inspiration from the likes of PAX or even Comic-Con – understanding that, yes, players want to get close to games, but they're even more interested in hearing from the people who make them.



Media Molecule's Dreams is a hard game to communicate, since it's capable of so many different things. Yet a recent round of studio tours had the assembled press salivating about the possibilities the game offers

> You'd be forgiven for thinking something had to give at some point, but 2017 just kept on going undeterred

And, indeed, the people that play them. For the third year, PSX also hosted the Capcom Cup, the culmination of the year's competitive *Street Fighter* circuit. This year's tournament was bigger than ever, expanding to a third day (the opening Friday playing host to a Last Chance tourney, letting a non-qualifier win entry to the tournament proper). The prize pool swelled too, to £250,000. Last year, the first trophy of the *Street Fighter V* era was won by an American, Du 'Nuckledu' Dang, and this year's result, in the context of a series whose competitive scene has long been dominated by Asian players, was an even bigger surprise. Saul 'MenaRD' Mena, a young player from the Dominican Republic, fought all the way through the loser's bracket, claiming plenty of high-profile scalps along the way before coming back from 2-0 down in Grand Finals to take the spoils. Capcom will be delighted with that story; it will likely be even more pleased by how the competitive *SFV* scene has improved. Last year's tournament was, like the game, a dull affair, improved only by the high stakes at hand. This year *Street Fighter V* looks much better balanced and a good deal more exciting, which bodes well for the game's third season, and the impending release of the (apparently much improved) *Arcade Edition*.

All of which made for an uncommonly busy end to the year in games, which until recently had tended to peter out once the Thanksgiving rush was over. The industry's event calendar is so busy these days that you'd be forgiven for thinking something had to give at some point, but 2017 just kept on going undeterred. We finish the year thinking of Josef Fares, and his middle finger raised to Hollywood, and of a game industry advancing eagerly on the top of the world. ■

All my friends

How the maker of Parappa The Rapper has made a career out of collaboration

Masaya Matsuura is the founding father of music games. While best known on these shores for the pioneering *Parappa The Rapper*, he's renowned in Japan for his prog-pop group, Psy-S (pronounced 'size'), which released 14 albums in 11 years, disbanding when Matsuura decided his future lay in games. He's still committed to music, however – when we speak, he's busy preparing for his next tour, which will take him from Tokyo to Osaka and finally Nottingham, where he's a headline guest at All Your Bass, a new videogame-music festival being held at the National Videogame Arcade in January.

Matsuura, however, doesn't see a distinction between these two seemingly discrete parts of his career. "The early '80s was a huge time, a revolution in using computers for music production," he tells us. "I had this huge blue ocean in front of me, a chance to make a new kind of music using the computer – and the synthesiser, too, though that wasn't computerised so much at the time.

"But there was another blue ocean – not one of tools, but friends. I had people around me who had used computers to do something else creative, that wasn't music. At the beginning of my career, things like music, movies, TV shows, paintings… they were all in their own categories. But when computer technology came along, they all came together. There was no difference between them."

As such, Matsuura's live show walks both lines, though he admits that his setlist is balanced in favour of his musical output rather than his contributions to videogames. He does, however, feel a duty to include as much of the latter as possible, recognising that people who only know him for his videogame work will be in the audience. "The game tracks weren't designed, or composed, to be played live," he says. "It's a strange thing for me to do, but maybe the audience wants to hear it in some way."

> "We have to find a different way to move forward, I think, like indie developers do"

While he's most widely known for his work in the PS1 era – for *Parappa*, of course, and the generative, experimental *Vib-Ribbon* – he's ensured he's kept his hand in over the years. A musical mobile game, *Furusoma*, was never released in the west; before that came iPod visualiser-cum-puzzler *Musika*, and the poorly received Wii game *Major Minor's Majestic March*, which saw him reunite with another of his friends, the *Parappa* artist Rodney Greenblat. More recently he contributed songs to *Beat Sports*, a musical sports game for Apple TV. While none has repeated the stunning success he had in the mid-'90s, the trend is clear: Matsuura is intrigued by the possibilities of new platforms.

So it's little surprise to hear that, while he's not actively involved in game development at the moment, he's thinking a lot about how his ideas might work in virtual, augmented or mixed reality. On tour he works with a VJ, and together the two have noodled around with AR. Yet he's no more forthcoming about what we might see next from him – and given how his most recent game project went, that's perhaps understandable.

Project Rap Rabbit (see **E**307) is a collaboration between Matsuura's NanaOn-Sha and iNiS, the revered Japanese music-game developer behind the likes of *Gitaroo Man* and *Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan*. Launched on Kickstarter last May, it pitched an ambitious reimagination of the music game, but the campaign closed having failed to even reach 20 per cent of its funding goal. A lack of gameplay footage and some absurd stretch goals certainly didn't help, but Matsuura is honest enough to acknowledge that the project's failure stemmed from one crucial factor. "The goal, the price was obviously too high," he says of the campaign's $850,000 target. "All these things were decided on [iNiS COO Keichi] Yano's side. I think he wanted to run this project in a traditional way, with a big initial investment. That approach doesn't translate well to Kickstarter, I don't think.



Masaya Matsuura

"We have to find a different way to move forward, I think, like indie developers do. Yano-san is still talking to various people about the possibility to move forward with it. I'm in no rush, but if we have a chance to proceed, that would be great."



Rap Rabbit did, if nothing else, prove that music games still have a place in the game industry of today. For a while, Matsuura's philosophy seemed outdated, his attempts to blend music with something else falling out of favour while the performative likes of *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* took centre stage. Yet with the plastic-instrument boom long over, perhaps the time is right for Matsuura, with his experimental, collaborative approach, to return. In addition to playing a live show at All Your Bass, he'll deliver a talk that will chart the course of a career that, while multifaceted, has always been at its core about working with other people. Whichever of his 'friends' he joins up with next, the results are sure to be worth seeing – and, of course, hearing. ■

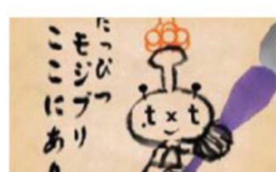
Parappa The Rapper **remains Matsuura's most famous creation. The recent PS4 remaster is based on the PSP port, however, not the original**





ABOVE ***Project Rap Rabbit*'s funding goal was far too high, but it was the stretch goals – including $4.95 million for a Switch version – that really killed its chance of success.** LEFT ***UmJammer Lammy*** **was a successor to *Parappa* that saw Matsuura reunite with Rodney Greenblat**





ABOVE **There's still no sign of the *Vib-Ribbon* ports that Sony announced in 2014.** RIGHT ***Beat Sports*** **was played on Apple TV's motion-enabled remote control. A sequel, *Super Beat Sports*, launched for Switch in November**



BASS NOTES

What to expect at Nottingham's new game-music festival



Matsuura is joined on the All Your Bass bill by other luminaries of the videogame-music scene. Highlights of the two-day programme of talks, performances and panels include C64 legend Rob Hubbard; Jessica Curry of The Chinese Room (with a performance of Dear Esther Live); and Rare legend David Wise, with a composer commentary focusing on his work on *Donkey Kong Country* and *Snake Pass*. Elsewhere there'll be workshops on adaptive and generative music, talks on the role VR can play in the next gen of music games, plus DJ sets, live podcasts and plenty more besides. For tickets, visit thenva.com.



WILD STYLE

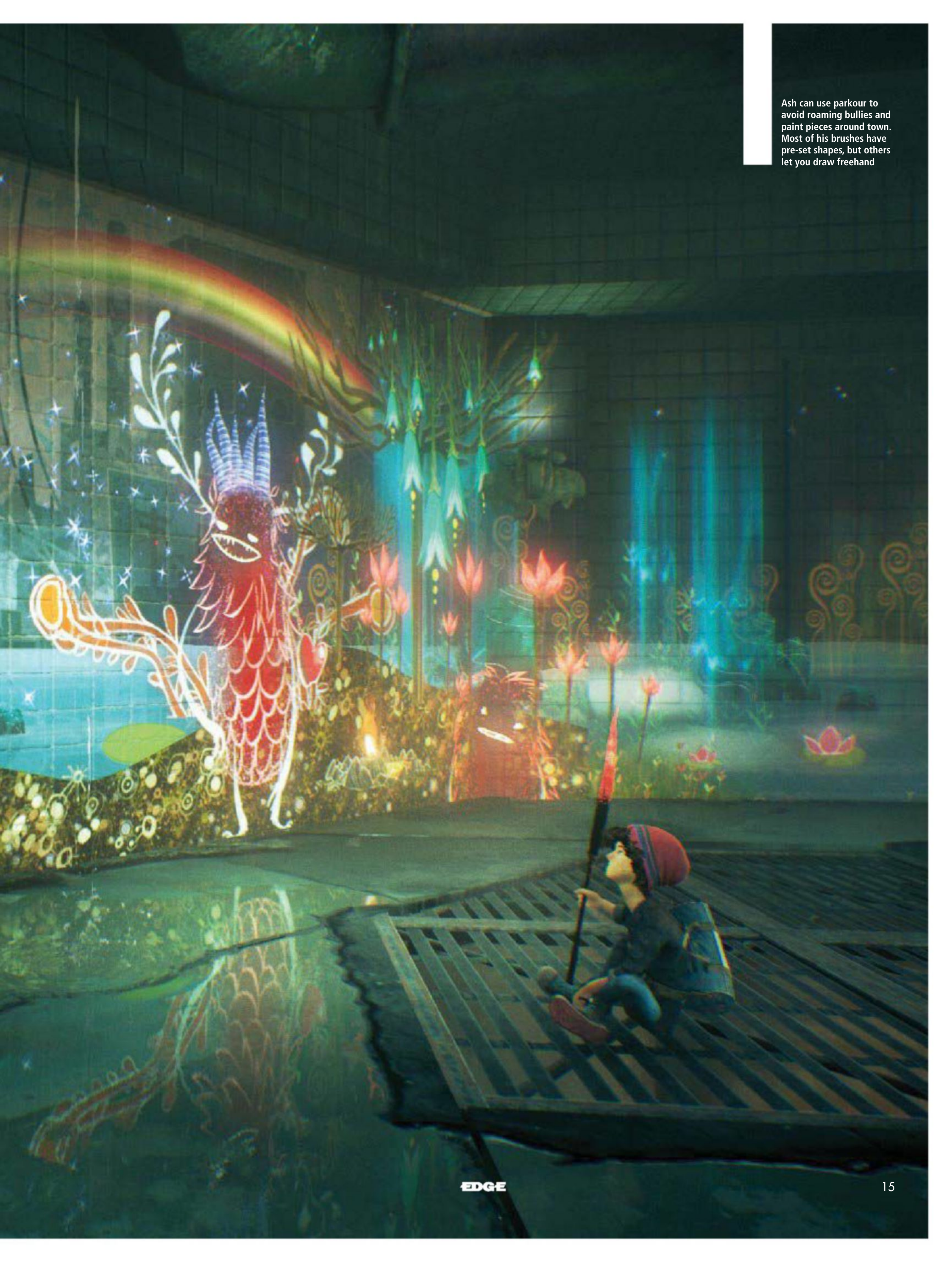
Paint your cares away in Concrete Genie, a gorgeous and intimate portrait of art and activism

You might not normally associate graffiti with environmental activism or, indeed, magic. But Pixelopus' puzzler-cum-action platformer is out to transform street art's bad reputation. Releasing this year on PS4, *Concrete Genie* tells the story of a bullied teenager named Ash, who finds relief from his troubles through tagging his hometown. But there's a twist: the paint is enchanted. "He discovers it can purify Denska's polluted walls," the game's creative **Dominic Robilliard**, tells us.

"For the creatures and landscapes that Ash paints, we take influence from children's storybook illustration – especially some of the darker tales," he says. The 3D world, meanwhile, takes inspiration from stop motion movies: "We love their handcrafted and magical quality. When you combine that with modern lighting and lensing techniques, it makes for a believable world that you could almost imagine stepping into."

Using the DualShock's motion controls, players can draw vibrant landscapes and fantastical creatures across the ramshackle fishing town. "It feels natural guiding the brush with small movements of the wrist," says Robilliard. "You don't have to be an artist to paint in our game – it's fun watching people experience the type of creative agency and satisfaction that usually only gifted artists feel."

How Ash will manage to both clean up the town and vanquish his tormentors in a swish of a brush remains unclear. But *Concrete Genie* hopes to convey just how powerful art can be, Robilliard says. "Painting can be a wonderful way to tune out other things that are going on in your life. Imagining what you are trying to make, and then bringing that to fruition, can be empowering and liberating." ■



Ash can use parkour to avoid roaming bullies and paint pieces around town. Most of his brushes have pre-set shapes, but others let you draw freehand

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"The makers of [*Detroit: Become Human*] should be thoroughly ashamed. **I think it's perverse.** Who thinks beating a child is entertainment?"

Neither is brushing your teeth, **Esther Rantzen**, but believe us, David Cage can't be stopped



"We've been on this path for 15 years with day-one DLC, subscription passes, pay-to-win… does the ESRB have to consider a new rating that could deal with **gambling and addictive mechanics**?"

Hawaii representative **Sean Quinlan** ensures the votes of a generation by calling out loot boxes



"It's nice to hate EA, blah, blah — I don't care about that shit. **All publishers fuck up** sometimes, you know?"

A Way Out director **Josef Fares** has his EA paymasters googling the phrase 'Can you un-sign a cheque?'

"We discovered that it wasn't the gamer who was mean or toxic, but the way the game design had put the players **in a situation that triggers toxicity**."



Jenova Chen on why you won't want to say all that stuff about our mums in Thatgamecompany's forthcoming *Sky*

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
Manufacturer Raw Thrills

If this is any guide, the arcade scene is in for a bit of a shake-up in 2018. While videmption machines, mobile ports and VR stations have been all the rage of late, Raw Thrills is turning back the clock by almost three decades by reviving the once-great beat-'em-up genre. Were it not for the voice cast (which is taken from the modern-day Nickelodeon cartoon) and the higher production values, you'd be forgiven for thinking *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* was a 25-year-old game; this is a fourplayer, side-scrolling brawler that hews tightly to the *Turtles In Time* template. The development team at Raw Thrills spent much of pre-production replaying the classics, citing the likes of *Streets Of Rage*, *Golden Axe* and *Double Dragon* – along, of course, with *Turtles In Time* itself – as vital reference points in the design of the game.

Indeed, from what we've seen, it might be a little *too* faithful to the source material. After all, decades have passed since this genre was at the peak of its popularity, but there's little evidence of that in a game whose combat system offers up only a few new moves and special attacks, and whose level design asks little more of you than walking to the right while duffing things up. Still, we suppose that's the point, since the people most likely to drop their spare change in the new machine are those who fondly remember the originals, and want more of the same. That seems fair enough. And to arcade owners unconvinced this will bring in the cash, relax: there's a built-in redemption system, too.

My Favourite Game Alan Denton

The US writer on TV Sonic versus classic Sonic and being a patient player

Alan Denton is a writer for children's TV, and was creative consultant and story editor for Cartoon Network's warmly received Sonic Boom, the first cartoon series starring Sega's mascot to be produced in almost a decade. Here, Denton shows why his involvement in the show was anything but coincidental.

How did you get the job on Sonic Boom?
I knew and had worked with Bill Freiberger, who they hired as head writer. When he told me I got the job on Sonic, I lit up and just started asking him a bunch of follow-up questions. "Is it classic Sonic? Is it modern Sonic? Is Big the Cat in it? Is Knuckles in it? Is Shadow in it?" And he was like, "I don't know any of this yet." (laughs) But that probably made him realise that maybe I'd be an asset.

Was Sonic one of your earliest gaming experiences, then?
I got the Genesis in 1992, which came bundled with *Sonic 2*. It was my primary system through elementary school. I did have an NES before a Genesis, but my family had an Atari 7800 before that – I must've been three years old playing that. The Atari 7800 actually came out in North America the same year as the NES; my grandparents had one, we went over to their house and then we had to have it.

Past Sonic shows have tended not to adhere to the canon of the games. Did that allow you freedom when writing for Boom?
Sonic Boom is a branch-off of the series, so there was a bigger sandbox to play in. It was almost a sort of alternate timeline, so we got to play more with the relationships and kind of make everybody more comedy-focused. It was liberating in that my job was just to come up with stories that I felt were funny, and then it'd be up to the people upstairs if they fit with the Sonic brand or what they wanted to do. I was just focused on trying to think of jokes, uninhibited, and seeing where the chips fell with everyone else.

CHILD'S PLAY
As well as Sonic Boom, Denton is also a writer on Nick Jr show Sunny Day, which has an even younger target audience. "The secret for writing comedy for kids is just write stuff that you personally think is funny, and then make it appropriate for kids," he explains. "I'm not going to worry about it going over the heads of the audience. I respect kids and I feel like they get it more than we give them credit for getting it. Growing up watching The Simpsons, they were throwing Citizen Kane jokes before I even had any idea what they were, but it didn't hurt me – I liked it even more after I started getting them."



Given the chance, would you want to write for the game proper?
You know, I'd love to take a crack at writing a full game script, it'd be a dream come true. Although I'd just be terrified that I'd screw it up because I don't know what the hell I'm doing!

> "I'd love to take a crack at writing a full game script, although I'd just be terrified that I'd screw it up"

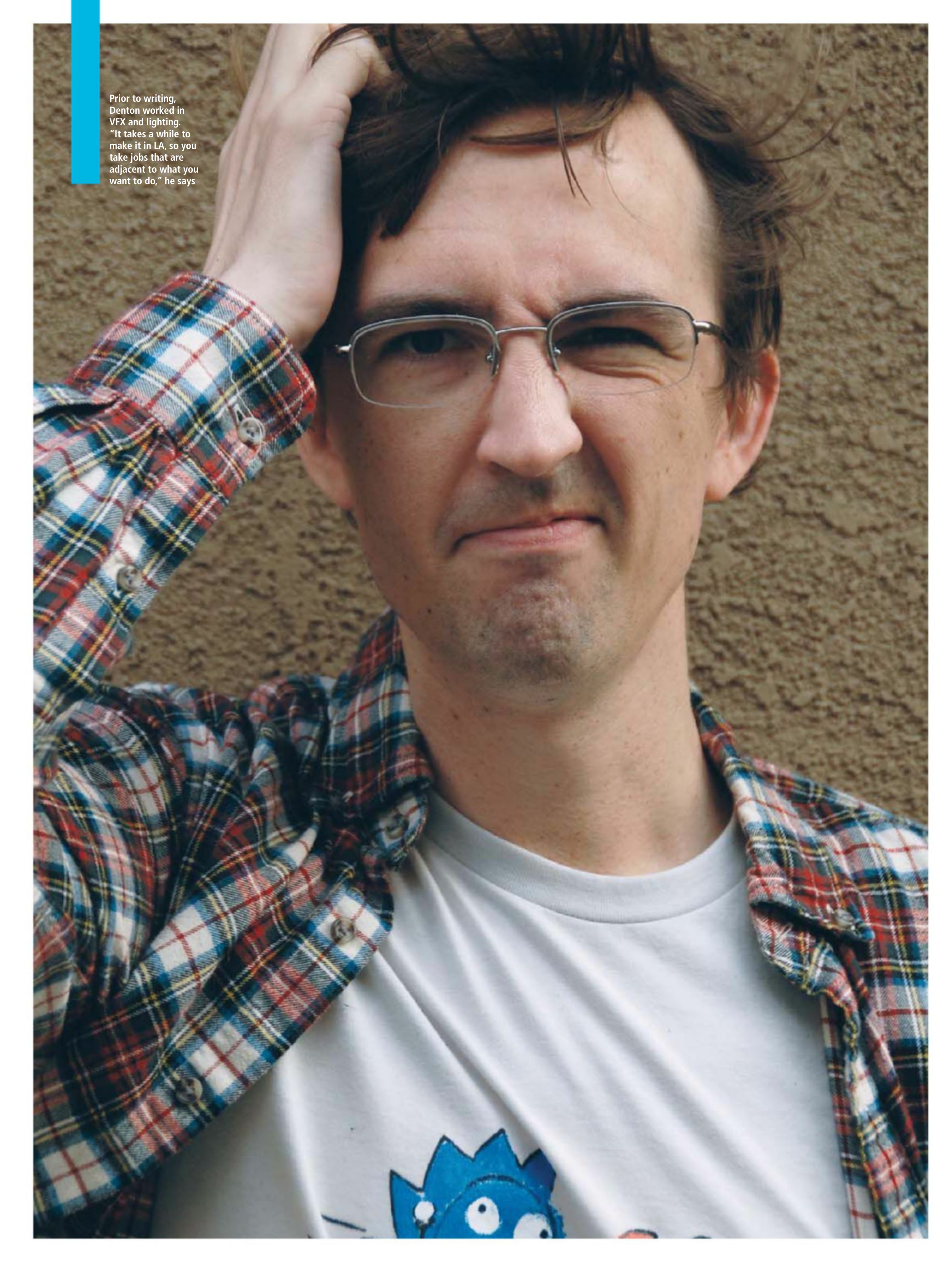
Have you played any of the recent *Sonic* games?
I played *Sonic Mania* recently, and it's awesome – everyone knows it's awesome. It's kind of this love letter to the fans; it was created by fans, so you can feel that love. It just feels right. I just remember when I first watched the clips of it, I pulled my wife over and I showed her the screen, and I was like, "This is a *new* game! This isn't a capture of a cartridge from 1994, this is a *new* game!" It just felt right, so I loved it.

You sound very much like someone who prefers classic 2D *Sonic*.
Probably. Those are the *Sonic* games I still own, they're usually the ones I go back and play the most. From '92 to '95, I was playing those all the time, so I kind of know their secrets better.

Are you still playing games?
I've been playing *GTAIV* recently (laughs). I am *so* behind. I subscribe to a subreddit called Patient Gamers: it's usually where people share deals on three- or five-year-old games, or someone who just has a discussion where they're like, "I just played *Red Dead Redemption* and it blew my mind." That's where I feel the most kinship. I can't keep on top of the current stuff, I can't get down with pre-ordering games. I'd rather just wait until it's a consensus Game Of The Year, then I'll buy it.

So is *Sonic* your favourite game?
Sonic 2 is very much in my heart, especially because it proved lucrative for me (laughs). But my favourite game, I'd probably say *Tecmo Super Bowl* on the NES.

We didn't see that coming.
That's *Tecmo Super Bowl*, not just *Tecmo Bowl*. *Tecmo Bowl*'s dogshit. *Super Bowl*'s where it's at. When I go home, I'll still play my brother at *Tecmo Super Bowl* tournaments. A few years ago, my friends did a pick-up football game and they videotaped it. They wanted me to edit together the highlights, and I edited it like it was *Tecmo Super Bowl* – all the sound effects from it, and cutscenes from the game. Something about it stuck with me. Or maybe it was just [the legendarily overpowered] Bo Jackson. ■



Prior to writing, Denton worked in VFX and lighting. "It takes a while to make it in LA, so you take jobs that are adjacent to what you want to do," he says

WEBSITE

Completionator
bit.ly/completionator

The year 2017 was an all-time great for videogames: many of us are stepping into 2018 with quite the backlog. Enter Completionator, a free website designed to help you work through it. Look past the ugly Impact fonts and the clumsy attempts at emulating social media, and you'll find a tool that's remarkably sophisticated for a service still in beta. Completionator can import your Steam and GOG game lists with a click (sadly, console purchases must be manually added) and allows you to add custom tags to titles. You can place games into a Backlog category, toggle Now Playing on ones you've begun, and define a completion by finishing the campaign or having rinsed the thing. There are tools for physical media collectors, too: if all else fails, you could always trade your pile of shame away on the forums.



VIDEO

Dam 52 Explained
bit.ly/dam52explained

If you're even vaguely interested in speedrunning, chances are, you've heard of Dam Agent 52. The record for *GoldenEye 007*'s first level sat at 53 seconds for over 15 years, until Karl Jobst finally beat it this December. RWhiteGoose's spirited breakdown video explains the significance of Dam 52 by charting the run's history (the discovery of the 2.x control style, the wide turn in the tunnel that forces fast-opening gates, the rare speed-boosting shots to the back), and calculates, to a tenth of a second, the time-saving factors that led to Jobst's 'one in a million' run.

WEB GAME

Doki Doki Literature Club
bit.ly/dokidokigame

It's not what it looks like. Indeed, the fluffy pink trimmings and anime dating-sim tropes are designed to lull players into a false sense of security. A strict content warning appears at the start, but it's all too easy to be suckered into a tale of four high-school girls – serious Yuri, spiky Natsuki, cheerful Sayori and the enigmatic and just Monika – learning to express their feelings. The first two hours drag, although the time commitment is key to the effectiveness of *Doki Doki*'s back half (which cost us a night's sleep, only partially due to browsing forums). It's become something of a cult hit, in spite of more elegant precedents, but its juxtaposition of genres and clever construction leaves a stark impression. We'll be eyeing Team Salvato's future output with wary interest.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

MEKAMON

Reach Robotics
bit.ly/mekamon

It speaks volumes for the quality of this remarkable Bluetooth-controlled toy that two **Edge**-affiliated arachnophobes were made thoroughly uncomfortable by it. MekaMon may only have four legs instead of eight, and it may stomp, rather than skitter. But there's something intimidating about the way it thunks towards you – especially if, like us, you start playing with it on a wooden floor. Thankfully you can tinker with its gait according to the surface you're playing on before you head into the smartphone app's AR games, using real-world furniture to take cover from enemy fire in story and arcade modes. Multiplayer's a real blast, but good luck finding a partner – at £300 a pop, this isn't impulse-buy territory.



continue

Overhand tactics
A canny streamer dodges copyright by 'playing' a real-life UFC match

Lens flair
Bungie's OP weapon giveaway was a balance patch for the ages

G's up
The *Monster Hunter: World* beta confirms the obvious: it's absolutely essential

Android's dream
In China, Wii and GC games hit Shield TV in 1080p…

quit

Hole in your rocket
Fancy a boxed Switch copy of *Rocket League*? That'll be £35

No No Kuni
Namco's cheery anime RPG slips to March. We hear it's great, if that helps

Hoes down
Multiplayer *Stardew Valley* has been delayed too. Our weeds!

China crisis
…but if there's no news about a western release news soon, we riot

TWEETS

Number of days to sell through 10 million units –
PlayStation 4: 268 Days
Nintendo Switch: 275 Days
Sega Dreamcast: 6,955 days and counting
Daniel Ahmad @ZhugeEX
Analyst, Niko Partners

Just had an email from someone thanking me for sending them *Tekken 7* and asking for *Dragon Ball Z* code.
Laura Skelly @Skellylicious
Senior PR, Capcom

Still salty *Uniracers* isn't on the SNES Classic.
Nathan Vella @Capy_Nathan
President, Capy Games

Unity's tutorials make me feel like I'll never be able to make games. I've made eight games, two of them in Unity.
Tom Francis @Pentadact
Founder, Suspicious Developments



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DISPATCHES FEBRUARY


Issue 314

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



Final lapse

The mental breakdown at the realisation your gaming pile of shame will not diminish has, for the last few years, transposed itself to your very magazine. Sometime around late 2012 I fell a few issues behind. It has taken me five years fluctuating between a three-to-eight issue deficit to finally be bang up to date with **E**313. Compulsively buying the mag over the counter and seeing the pile of issues to read rise and rarely fall has tortured me. The shame. The guilt.

I have truly, without exaggeration, toiled and troubled with this for half a decade. The weight that has just lifted from seeing an end to that pile is joyous and at the same time saddening somehow. I feel like I've 100-per-cented you before the game has finished and now lament the loss of the feeling that I was letting you down.

Depression can be a funny old thing. Two things help. Gaming, and your passion for it, that I long to continue reading – but from now on I'll be bang on the pulse of it. Thanks for being a constant.
Steve Masters

We don't mind when you read **Edge**, Steve, just so long as you read it. Welcome back to the present day, anyway. It's terrifying.

Shite Christmas

A few months ago I was talking to a friend, who is also a gamer, and we realised that we couldn't think of any major games coming out for Christmas that we were really excited about. It was the first time we could remember being in this situation.

Edge reviews of this year's major winter releases have all been largely sixes or sevens. Last year by comparison you hardly had the greatest winter in gaming, but still had excellent games in *Battlefield 1*, *Titanfall 2* and *Dishonored 2*. This year there have been some brave attempts to reset series such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Call Of Duty*, but they've hardly resulted in the best games in the series. Maybe I should encourage these publishers to continue down their development path by buying these games because they are a step in the right direction. However for the price of a modern triple-A game I don't want it to be 'alright', I expect it to be excellent. Particularly in the case of *Origins*. I can't be bothered to invest 50 hours roaming around a flawed open-world game, and I'm their perfect target market.

The only game I recently bought is actually the DLC for *Horizon Zero Dawn* which was an excellent reason to return to an excellent game. But that does tell you something about the current state of the gaming industry when, on consoles at least, one of the highest quality things out now is an expansion.
Jem Duducu

"I can't be bothered to invest 50 hours roaming around a flawed open-world game"

Yes, the big boys did rather manage to spoil the 'best year ever' narrative. We expect that scandal and lukewarm sales will see them buck up their ideas as we head into 2018. Hopefully, anyway.

Music to our ears

Recently, my gaming time has been completely given over to experiencing the Wii U's prestigious back catalogue. I missed five-to-ten critically acclaimed games across the console's ill-fated lifespan, and Nintendo's ability to delight across the length of every one of them is something that will never cease to impress me. On this subject, I found the comments of *Breath Of The Wild* director Hidemaro Fujibayashi particularly interesting (**E**313), as he described Nintendo's desire to actively aim for this continuous quality.

Back to my Wii U project, these last months have made me, a gamer of over 20



years, realise something new about myself and what helps me to connect to a game. Ahead of anything else, for me it all comes down to the music. I don't know the key to great game music, but it feels most right when the sounds in my ears describe the theme and setting better than words ever could. Whether it's 2016's *Doom* or *Wind Waker HD*, *Starcraft 2* or *Borderlands*, great music is enchanting and transporting to a degree that other components of the gaming experience simply can't be. Changes in tempo raise the neck hairs, while catchy melodies will be nostalgically hummed for years to come.

It's comforting that in an age of sequels and loot boxes there remains a part of the hobby that is free and expressive, never ageing as the games themselves do. I look forward to my game-music playlist growing ever longer in years to come.
Nick Burke

Absolutely, Nick – and thoroughly well-timed, given this issue's cover star. The *Katamari* soundtrack helped dull the pain of a brutal Christmas deadline. A bit, anyway.

The politics of freelancing

Your Post Script for *Wolfenstein II* I hold in the highest regard. You are right to point out that *New Colossus'* cartoonesque depiction of bigotry does little to further understand our current dilemma. Indeed: "While Nazism is German, prejudice is not". It saddens me that countless people happily plow down virtual racists while doing nothing about, if not supporting, real-life racism. Your reflection on political affairs and how games depict them is rare in mainstream computer game press, and bold.

But there's more in issue 313: two of your columns intelligently discuss gaming's relationship to political discourse. I can't help but wonder if **Edge** has opened the floodgates! Nathan Brown openly states that he doesn't want to talk about politics at all, and I often hear similar sentiment from gamers. Many say 'they just want to play' (which is a political stance in itself).

I like to think of **Edge** as a thinking person's magazine, and when I open your pages, I'm not interested in playing; I'm interested in thinking. The columns are my favourite part to read (thanks for bringing back a third one!). There are plenty of opinions on the web, but finding a few on my doorstep written by smart folks is worth the subscription fee alone. Considering the amount of opinions being thrown around, it would seem to me that intelligent writing would not only be a popular one, but a necessary one.
Robert August de Meijer

As we recall, Robert, you're Dutch, and so were fortunate to be spared the pain in your youth of one Ben Elton. We learned very quickly to leave the politics, mostly, to those who know what they're talking about.

Force the issue

Long term reader, **E**1 onwards etc. Wow, who put out your Jedi funeral pyre? Just received the latest **Edge** and read the *Battlefront II* review. Thanks for ruining the campaign; I've never known you to put so many spoilers in a review. Is this to get us as furious as you? Then you totally hammer a game because of loot boxes. I agree they messed them up, but didn't see as much anger with *GTAV* Shark cards, *FIFA* points or *Hearthstone* now they are firing out three or four expansions annually. I love this game and have put loads of hours in on multiplayer. As far as I can see the Star Cards aren't that game-changing – most players have similar loadouts to me. I also feel it's totally unfair to the team who made this game as an obvious labour of love – 4 is ridiculous! Finally, I loved *Overwatch*, but as a 46-year-old gamer I have limited play time. I had to trade the game in as I was frequently waiting 20 to 25 minutes between games. I was not alone in this problem, but have yet to see any bad press against Blizzard, or a 4 given to an otherwise superb game. Keep up the (usually) amazing work.
Mike Walker

As you know, Mike, we don't re-review games down the line, so *Battlefront II* sticks out for committing its cardinal sins on day one. And on the balance of this issue's mailbag, it seems we made the right call:

Life's a GaaS

It seems unfeasible to see an **Edge** 4 sitting on the same page as the beautiful sight of an X-Wing approaching a Star Destroyer framed against a glorious sunscape. A 4! Harsh, maybe, but kudos for eloquently and firmly summing up everyone's dismay at EA's bodge.

It's been coming, of course: I quit *Hearthstone* years ago once I realised that ponying up was the only way to make progress through the ranks if I wasn't prepared to grind forever on basic decks. But at least I got 30 hours of solid, competitive entertainment before I got to the paywall – and for free.

The *Battlefront II* debacle seems to sum up 2017 very well. Oodles of quality slightly tainted by the fear that singleplayer games are going for good; here come Games as a Service, guzzling up your money even after the entrance fee has been paid.

It's difficult to be too worried when this year has given me such a fine backlog. For me, Ganon lives; a young Aloy is wandering around a training patch of tutorial grass; Trico is in chains; Agent 47 is en route from Paris to Sapienza; Akira Kurusu hasn't even been renamed. If 2018 trends towards GaaS, then I'm content that this generation has given me deep reserves of quality games to live off for some time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I just need three more moons to complete my set from the Sand Kingdom. And I don't have to pay to go and get them.
Ivan Harding

Enjoy your PS Plus subscription! (See, Mike? Flattery gets you *everywhere*.) ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

The gradual erosion of the distinction between public space and private space is never more annoyingly demonstrated than when you are in the cinema or the theatre and someone decides to shine a flashlight into your eyes, in the form of using their phone to check Facebook or whatever. You could certainly argue that anyone willingly entering an auditorium also enters into a pact of darkness for the duration, and if they break it they ought to be summarily ejected. Another way to do it would be for the establishment to install a phone-hijacking beam to ensure that, if anyone turned on their phone, all they would see would be the message: "Look at the big screen" or "Look at the stage".

In a way, this is the most interesting aspect of the latest PlayLink functionality in Supermassive's new work *Hidden Agenda*, a PS4 murder-detective party game in which players use their own phones instead of DualShocks. When there is, for the moment, no input expected from the players, their phones just display a screen with the message "Look at the TV". This can be read as a subtle commentary on the common domestic phenomenon of dual-screening, when you're watching a TV programme that's not really interesting enough so you are also reading Twitter instead. The clever thing about *Hidden Agenda* is that it is built around dual-screening, while also managing the phone-holder's attention in a matter that brooks no argument, indeed is rather dictatorial. For the duration of the game, the phone is transformed from a cornucopia of unlimited distraction, engineered to generate addiction in players through intermittent reinforcement, to a single-purpose tool.

Using phones as controllers in this BYOD way is a masterstroke, too, of accessible usability: it instantly gets rid of the high barrier to entry of such games for most non-habitual videogamers, which is the rebarbative complexity of your average joypad. (We tend to think of something like the Switch's Joy-Cons as being pretty much as simple as possible, but they really aren't if you've never held them before.) The idea of using the phone as a logbook in which players can check previously learned information is an excellent one, and navigating each player's cursor to the decision box for story choices quickly becomes intuitive for all. It is a shame, though, that using the phones essentially as remote touchpads is far more problematic in the fast-reaction QTEs throughout the game, because pointer lag can cause you to lose one through no fault of your own. *Hidden Agenda* also commits the cardinal sin, here, of forcing you to 'win' QTEs even though they lead to a narrative failure state anyway: you have to hit a bunch of QTEs to prevent a character tripping over obstacles while she pursues a suspect, for instance, but once you've succeeded the suspect manages to escape anyway. So what exactly was the point?



The game has a great cybernetic premise, which is to let players use their phones as detectives' notebooks

There is, nevertheless, much to love about this moody, rather well-written game and the cleverness of its construction. As usual in such games, many of the binary choices are placebos and amount to pretty much the same thing ("We have to be honest with each other" versus "Why don't you trust me?"), but some apparently non-critical ones can be surprisingly emotionally satisfying, as for instance if you decide to start being rude to a colleague who is acting like a total dick. The choices that more obviously represent potential narrative branches, meanwhile, often spur the players to genuine debate about what is preferable.

At its best, then, *Hidden Agenda* does begin to resemble something like an occasionally-interactive TV cop drama. But it sorely needs a more sophisticated approach to the police-procedural side of things. The way crime scenes are combed for clues, for example, currently makes no sense at all: you are told what clues you are looking for, but only by means of small and abstruse monochrome icons, and for no good reason there is a very short time window in which to find them. Each such scene therefore predictably degenerates into frantic cursor-scrubbing, which doesn't seem very hard-boiled law enforcement to me. The game has a great cybernetic premise, which is to let players use their phones as detectives' notebooks and general controllers. All that future games using the same system have to do now is figure out how to give us more interesting things to do with this most protean of tools.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

The day has finally come: *Puzzle & Dragons* is closing. There are, however, a few caveats to this, humanity's darkest day. Firstly, it's not actually been confirmed yet, but as an eternal pessimist I tend naturally to assume the worst. And secondly, it's only the European server that's at death's door – the still-lucrative North American operation, and the absolutely gargantuan Japanese version, aren't going anywhere, at least yet. While things might be clearer by the time you read this, as I write all we know is that sales of *Puzzle & Dragons*' premium currency are being halted in Europe in mid-January. That sounds very much like the death knell for a free-to-play game.

I'm in two minds about it, to be honest. Nothing lasts for ever, obviously, and I knew I'd have to stop playing it at some point. And it'll probably be good for me to finally have a reason to put it down, with no option to pick it back up. But it's been a regular part of my life for over four years now; according to the login screen that greets me each morning when I fire it up, I've played *Puzzle & Dragons* on over 1,400 separate days. It's the most frequently used thing on my phone; it was the reason I've stuck with Apple devices despite the increasing lure of Android, because the game's never been released in Europe for Google's OS.

Most importantly – and I don't think I've said this enough over the last four years – it's honestly one of the best games I've ever played, and it might just be the most important one. It's the reason I stand up for mobile games, and free-to-play, and RNG, and various videogame bêtes noires; thanks to *PAD*, I know how these things work, and understand that they can be implemented in non-evil ways. And it's just terrific, a near-perfect expression of a videogame's graceful power curve and high skill ceiling – both of which, thanks to the constant updates required of a successful F2P game, stretch further up towards the heavens with each new monster or mechanic. If you haven't checked it out, I actually feel bad for you. I'm going to miss it terribly.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

It's honestly one of the best games I've ever played, and it might just be the most important one

Yet it's got me thinking more broadly about the way games die, and how we choose to remember them. Simon Parkin, frequently of these pastures, wrote about this recently for the Observer, laying out the various ways in which players of online games have marked their eventual closures. "The passing of a virtual world presents a unique challenge to the documentarians of our nascent digital culture," he writes. "How do historians capture for posterity online worlds that constantly change, evolve and then disappear?"

Well, quite. But Simon was writing about large, shared worlds; *PAD* has a community and a co-op component, but it's first and foremost a private, personal game. I expect that, when it finally, properly dies worldwide, it will not be widely remembered for its gameplay qualities. Instead, it will be a question of numbers: of its colossal userbase, of the money it brought in, of the rate at which it helped creator Gungho Online Entertainment to expand. Historians will talk about its impact: of how it established a new genre and inspired a raft of copycats, and how Gungho and others would set up a self-regulatory watchdog when the government started sniffing around gacha games, sensing a scandal in waiting and a buck to be made.

All true, and fair. Yet that's not the game that's been in my pocket for more than four years. And with no shared-world multiplayer component, there's no way for the small, tight-knit *PAD* community to collectively mark its passing in the way that, say, players of *City Of Heroes* did, marching on the capital with flaming torches, ending the game on their own collective terms. They're already talking about how they might commemorate it. Currently, a popular suggestion is to sell off your entire monster collection in-game, then spend the proceeds on as many copies of Princess Soprano as you can afford. One of the first cards to be made available for purchase with an in-game currency, she's rubbish, but replaces the in-game SFX with drum sounds from *Taiko No Tatsujin*.

In other words, *Puzzle & Dragons* will go out in Europe with a whimper, not a bang. The game will live on across the Atlantic and in Asia, and will continue to thrive, but our European journey is at its end. I still don't quite know what to make of it. But I know I'll remember it for the right reasons, and be thankful for what it taught me. It'll be nice to have a bit more free time, I suppose – to say nothing of my phone battery.

Nathan Brown is ***Edge****'s editor, and for a few more weeks is still LF Rushana with a Fujin or laser inherit for co-op A4*



ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

Quitting a big studio is an interesting experience. When I left EA they responded by sending me a letter from a lawyer reminding me of my obligations to keep my corporate secrets secret, while at Ubi I had both a non-solicit and a non-compete clause in my contract that I was required to respect. The non-compete states that you cannot work in a competing business for a certain amount of time; it's illegal in many places, such as California, because it's considered a restriction of your right to work. In practice it doesn't seem to have been enforced in Montreal (but this hasn't been truly tested). The non-solicit is more difficult, because it means that for a set amount of time you aren't allowed to approach anyone you worked with before (although they can approach the company). Luckily for us, the talent pool in Montreal is deep, and the year of restrictions is passing quickly beneath a seemingly endless torrent of organisation and paperwork.

It would be nice to think that once the decision to launch Typhoon had been made we could just hang out a shingle and start hiring. But we didn't even have a name at that point, let alone a logo (or, indeed, a shingle). The first few weeks were spent iterating on our ideas for the game itself, but were also surrounded by the mechanics of hiring and getting a functional studio space up and running. For posterity, I will run through some of the more interesting decisions we made, and why.

Firstly, naming a game studio is hard, for odd reasons. The goal was to be short; able to be pronounced (and preferably similarly) in both French and English; not too witty, as I thought it'd get tired fast; and crucially, not already owned by someone somewhere in the world since we needed to be able to get the domain. This left about three words. Typhoon seemed like we could own it if we made a good game, and it didn't come with a lot of baggage.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

> We forgot to install an exhaust fan, and during one summer meeting we hit a solid 42 degrees

In terms of location, we were looking for somewhere central, preferably with plenty of places to eat, and somewhere that was as close as possible to a Metro station for easy access. Eventually we found a place that needed floors, lights, desks, interior walls, paint and a $20,000 transformer upgrade, but we could run all the computers without fear of an explosion. And better still, nobody would freeze to death on the walk from the Metro to the office during the winter.

Once we had an empty space, we needed furniture. We got most of it second hand, which feels a bit like stripping the corpse of a dead business, but decent chairs are a must if you're going to be sitting in them for 10 hours a day and those new Aeron chairs cost over 1,000 bucks a pop.

Every day for the first few months it seemed like there was another functional object we had to source: computers are an obvious need, but monitor stands were easy to forget. When we built a small conference room we forgot to install an exhaust fan, and during one summer meeting we hit a solid 42 degrees. Worse, the lovely bay windows that ran down one wall suddenly began to bounce blinding reflected light onto our monitors between 3 and 5pm in the autumn before we realised we needed blinds.

These issues are the kind of things that are solved invisibly at a big studio, along with the lurid details behind 'bagel Wednesdays', but which are crucial to finding, hiring and supporting the people who are going to make your game with you.

Looking around the room right now, I think it's safe to say that most of the team are in the middle of their careers and that they made a decision to trade the more secure options available at a large studio for a chance to have more personal ownership over the projects and teams with which they're involved. It sounds like an obvious decision, but once you add kids and mortgages to the mix, it becomes something that you need to think about carefully.

On my side, I feel as though we are offering a kind of bet. Take this risk; we will cover as much of the comforts of a big studio as we can, but you will be making less money in the short term in the hope that we make something great, and if it pays off you can regain the big-studio perks in a small-studio environment. All of which is almost completely dependent on our first game. If it works, then everybody wins. If it's not good enough, then maybe those free bagels are going to sound pretty amazing all of a sudden.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick


PC GAMER WEEKENDER
PLAYED ON
OMEN by hp
2018
PLUS NEW FEATURES FOR 2018: Get Into Games, OMEN by HP Bootcamp and The Arcade
Olympia London
17th - 18th February
EARLY BIRD TICKET OFFER EXTENDED EXCLUSIVELY FOR
EDGE
READERS!
THE BEST PRE-RELEASE GAMES
CUTTING EDGE VR
PC WORKSHOPS

#315

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Creature comfort

Getting comfortable is often a short hop from boredom. While plenty of game makers are content to stick to what they know, others push at their creative boundaries. For many developers, constantly challenging their own expectations of their games – and indeed, of themselves – is what keeps their nine-to-five, if you can call it that, fresh.

As virtual reality grows ever more sophisticated, so do our basic expectations of its games: mainly, that they won't require us to revisit our lunch. Polyarc is taking care to prioritise a comfortable user experience in VR platformer *Moss* (p46). Hopping around in firstperson view as Quill could have been a nauseating old time. Instead, a considered blend of thirdperson platforming and firstperson contributions from the unseen player – tackling enemies, say, or environmental puzzles – keeps things pleasant. Ubisoft's VR shooter *Space Junkies* (p44), despite jetpacks, shotgun-twirling and micro-gravity, is also surprisingly comfortable. And it reflects Ubisoft's attempts to push at its perceived boundaries, as one of the only large publishers to truly throw its weight behind VR.

Admittedly, nobody could accuse *Final Fantasy Dissidia NT* (p38) of breaking new ground: a fighting-game spin-off of a popular JRPG isn't exactly a revolutionary concept. Nor, if we're honest, is *Knights & Bikes* (p42), a game about friendship that's executed with charm and whimsy by developers who used to work for the charming, whimsical Media Molecule.

Yet in *Indivisible* (p34), developer Lab Zero leaves its comfort zone in the dust. How does the studio follow up its debut game, the ultra-technical fighting game *Skullgirls*? With an ingenious retooling of the party RPG, as it turns out. We're not saying developers need to reinvent the wheel with every new game, of course, but in an increasingly crowded market, there are few finer ways to make yourself stand out.

MOST WANTED

Street Fighter 30th Anniversary Collection
PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
This 12-game compendium may be eight months late for *Street Fighter*'s actual 30th birthday, but promises to be worth the wait. The prospect of all the good *SFIIs*, all three versions of *SFIII* and the Alpha games to boot is irresistible.

Yakuza 6 PS4
With *Yakuza 0* and *Kiwami* giving this series its best year on western shores in 2017, our thoughts naturally turn to the impending release of the most ambitious *Yakuza* to date. From what we've seen of the Japanese version, this deserves to be the series' biggest success to date.

Red Dead Redemption 2
PC, PS4, Xbox One
Not long to go now. A characteristically secretive Rockstar means we're left with more questions than answers, but one thing's for sure. No game will sell better, or likely *be* better, than this in 2018.



INDIVISIBLE

A Metroidvania RPG shows Lab Zero branching out from its fighting game roots

Developer Lab Zero Games
Publisher 505 Games
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
Origin US
Release 2018

We expect certain things from Lab Zero Games. The studio behind *Skullgirls* knows how to unpack a virtual punch. It's also very good at designing memorable characters (we still can't unsee demon nun Double unpeeling herself into a pulsating mass). It's fiercely detail-oriented, each fighter in *Skullgirls'* small roster a technical labour of love. Sprawling Metroidvania RPG *Indivisible*, then, is something we weren't expecting from this studio: when you're used to focusing on individual frames on single screens, creating an entire world must be quite a culture shock.

"I'm starting to realise why RPGs have so many bugs," says **Mike Zaimont**, lead design director and programmer. "In a fighting game, you spend months looking at the same character: you implement a thing, you try all the edge cases you can think of, you find bugs. You're staring at the same part of the game for a long time, so you find a lot more of the problems. But in an RPG, or something with a giant world, you test every edge case you can think of in 15 minutes, and then have to move on. It's a lot of work – I slept some time last year – but it's something we want to be doing."

It was time for something new. Zaimont had always wanted to make a Metroidvania game, and the idea of a more accessible game reinvigorated Lab Zero. "We were interested in branching out of fighting games," says **Peter Bartholow**, CEO. "As much as we love *Skullgirls*, it's an assembly-line kind of thing. With *Indivisible*, we approached one publisher and they wanted something like *Child Of Light*. We all went and played this platformer RPG. And then we thought of *Valkyrie Profile*, which has our favourite battle system, and also fits well with our fighting-game chops."

They didn't end up signing with the publisher, but the concept remained at the forefront of everybody's minds. "The other major reason for doing this is that not a lot of people on the team play fighting games seriously," Zaimont says, "so not a lot played *Skullgirls* after it came out. It was like, we got to work on this, and the animations are cool – but we also wanted to do something as a studio that everybody there could get behind, play and actually have fun with."

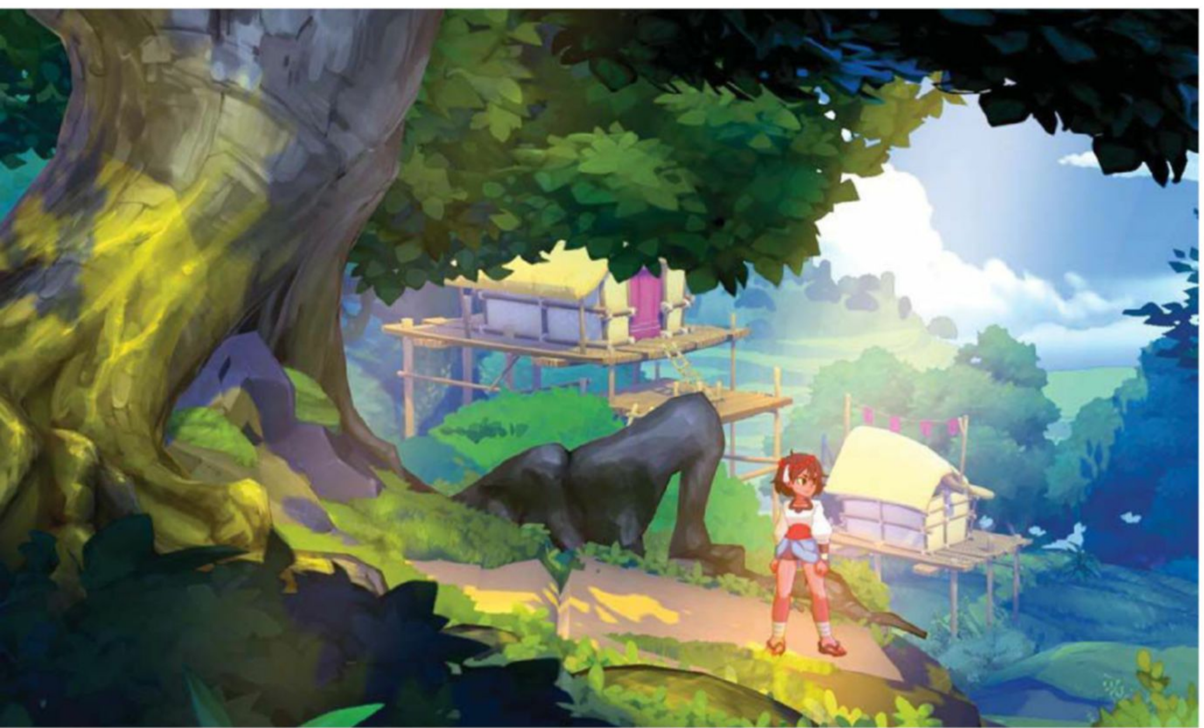
Plenty of fans have supported the new approach, too, having collectively pledged over two million dollars to make *Indivisible* a reality. Many of those are doubtless *Skullgirls* fans – but some are bound to be newcomers attracted by this friendlier approach. Starting a fighting-game demo can be intimidating; but from the outset *Indivisible*'s demo is a familiar, *Mega Man*-like joy, as you move Ajna from left to right, hopping up ruins with ease and effortlessly sliding under obstacles. ▶





Mike Zaimont, lead designer (top) and Peter Bartholow, CEO of Lab Zero Games





ABOVE **These enemies have an attack that can hit your entire party. An 'all block' button has everybody defend, but costs more Iddhi meter: if just one person is being attacked, quick reactions preserve resources.**
LEFT ***Indivisible*'s art style is softer than *Skullgirls'*, where thick black lines stood out. Here, outlines are coloured, creating a more uniform effect with backgrounds**

LEFT **Smart sound design encourages exploration, with collectable Ringsels audibly shimmering when you're near one. In the full game, the crystals provide buffs.**
BELOW **You counter a grab by tapping, rather than holding, the defend button. It's tricky to process: we're not using our own 'throw' to tech the move, as in fighting games**

ABOVE **Subtle environmental hints suggest secrets or danger. Despite the spotlight signalling trouble, an enemy takes us by surprise here, getting the first hit in.**
RIGHT **Your Iddhi meter is a shared resource, drained when you're defending, healing, or using strong attacks. *Indivisible*'s supers can deal more damage for every stock you've saved**





"I design by feel, a lot," Zaimont says. "This has been collaborative with people who aren't necessarily able to be like, 'This needs to be two frames longer', but, 'This feels slow', or 'Play this game and try this out'." Lead environment artist and *Towerfall* fan Max Gonzales gave Zaimont some harsh, but fair, feedback on the way Ajna's bow felt. "I spent a long time crying in the bathroom," Zaimont jokes. "But because I have a 128fps camera for doing lag tests for fighting games, I did things like recording him playing *Towerfall* with his hands in front of the screen." This may seem excessive, but *Indivisible*'s weapons are crucial to both battle and movement. Firing an arrow, for instance, can flip switches in hard-to-reach places. A hand axe thunked into stone walls helps Ajna climb sheer surfaces, as well as cutting down vines blocking paths – *and* taking bigger chunks out of nasty monsters.

Enemies are, predictably, visually arresting, inspired by various cultural mythologies. Succubus-type grapplers are tangles of organs hidden by long hair; giant-tongued green boars turn into rolling balls of death capable of damaging your entire party. Your party of four characters are each mapped to a single attack button, as in *Valkyrie Profile*. When we tap Ajna's, she runs forward to swing the axe we've found, while holding down on the D-pad and tapping a second time launches our foe into the air.



In ex-professional fighting game player Zaimont's hands, it's clear that this simple-input, combo-centric system has been thoughtfully constructed, both superficially accessible and with potential for player discovery and creativity.

Encounters are made swift and active through the use of stamina meters. Unique to each character, they dictate how many moves a character can pull off consecutively before needing to rest. Working out how to string together an optimal combo, then, can be the difference between battering a foe in one fell swoop or losing to a blob in a ramen bowl. Mongolian archer Zebei's shots can pierce multiple enemies, while snarky shamaness Razmi's stackable down-attack will slow an enemy attack's recharge rate. Healer duo Ginseng and Honey prove invaluable, but also challenging to use. We're able to stack a mortar-grinding move that heals the party more the longer it's charged – but it explodes if overdone, forcing you to decide whether to blow the extra HP early, or save it for a bigger boost later in the battle.

And while our demo proves generally amenable, we fear that there may be some unavoidable walls to run into later on. It's a complex system, and Lab Zero wants to encourage players to work things out for themselves (there will, we're told, be a training mode designed for workshopping). We have a feeling, however, that things will hinge on how combos and complex character moves are introduced. There are multiple types of block, for instance: one requires keener timing but significantly reduces damage. Had we known, we might have switched our party to full DPS, relying on our reactions to give ourselves an edge in tougher boss fights.

Enemies are, predictably, visually arresting, inspired by various cultural mythologies

Still, *Skullgirls* was a fine teacher, and we don't doubt that Lab Zero will manage something similar here. But it's another task on the to-do list, and we worry that the studio has bitten off too much. But Bartholow and Zaimont surprise us. "Most of the things in the game exist in one form or another," says Bartholow. "We're close to done animating all the enemies and bosses," Zaimont adds.

Whether the world and its inhabitants will be as rich and varied as hoped, given the short timeframe and tiny team, remains to be seen. At least Lab Zero has the spirit of exploration nailed, if Zaimont's outlook is anything to go by. "One of my favourite things I've learned about *Super Metroid* is that the map was not finalised until early January," he says (the game launched in March 1994). "They were still messing with stuff right up until the end, because you test and change things based on what people think. Making a world that people want to explore and try to find all the nooks and crannies of – I think that just comes down to iteration." ■



Between the lines

Indivisible's battle indicators are a recent addition, inspired by *Final Fantasy XII*'s similar system. "One of the complaints we had about the prototype was knowing who was attacking who," says Bartholow. "We got around that by slowing it down. But we wanted to speed up battle, so the indicators allowed us to do that." Red lines indicate regular attacks, while yellow warns of an incoming grab. Zaimont's subtler visual indicators – screen borders, sound effects and coloured flashes – all went largely unnoticed in early demos: "I was kind of annoyed because most of those indicators were fairly blatant to *me*, but not to a lot of other people." There are plans to reduce the obviousness of the lines as the game goes on and players become acclimatised.



H Y P E

DISSIDIA FINAL FANTASY NT

Developer	Team Ninja
Publisher	Square Enix
Format	PS4
Origin	Japan
Release	January 30

Short cutscene introductions at the beginning of each brawl add personality to encounters. Antagonist Kuja is a particular delight: his excellent original voice actor returns to lend one-liners a characteristic sass











TOP **Odin buffs your team's speed and dash stamina when summoned. He looks intimidating, certainly, but is not as effective as other choices.** ABOVE **There's a lot to keep track of on screen, though we're assured the UI will be cleaned up before launch.** MAIN **You can have multiples of one character on a team. Yes, a three-Sephiroth boy band is possible, if you're that way inclined**



TOP **Purple Bravery numbers mean you're ready to launch an HP attack. Thankfully, you won't be charged valuable meter if you miss a shot – a courtesy that is hugely appreciated amid the chaos of the battlefield.** LEFT **Cloud's EX move, Limit Break, increases his defence and decreases the time needed to charge his moves. It's not quite as flashy as his homing meteor HP attack**



DISSIDIA FINAL FANTASY NT

You're going to need some time. Play *Dissidia Final Fantasy NT* for half an hour or so, and it'd be all too easy to dismiss this arena brawler out of hand. It is hectic, a jumble of characters and magical projectile spam. But give it a while, and you'll start to see the forest for the trees: the tactical team synergies, the grim precision of mid-air fights, and the deceptive simplicity of its systems. Just hang in there a little longer.

It's a big ask. Nowadays, the onus is on fighting-game developers to provide an instantly accessible game. For the most part *Dissidia NT* has stayed true to its PSP forebears' complex roots. But there are friendly changes: battles are 3v3 instead of head-to-head, with the emphasis now on team play, giving you and your two allies a shared pool of three lives. Each of the characters (from the full range of *Final Fantasy* games) is assigned an RPG-like class for ease of understanding.

Vanguards such as Cloud hit hard and close, while Lightning, an Assassin, uses her speed and agility to flit in and out of danger. Specialists with unique traits are sometimes less intimidating than they sound – Kain is simple to pick up and play, though his strictly mid-range attacks mean his is a game of savvy positioning. Marksmen provide a sterner challenge: series newcomer Y'shtola takes practice before you're able to reliably fire her orbs into foes. In our demo, each brawler can use one of two different EX movesets. Building your team to stack buffs and debuffs, or to compensate for a teammate's weakness, adds a level of tactical depth to pre-fight preparations without overwhelming you.



For all the nudges towards familiarity, however, *Dissidia NT* is resolutely unique. The action is still underpinned by the series' signature system. All players start off with 1,000 Bravery points, and taps of X, alongside directional inputs, unleash Brave attacks. These chip away at your duelling partner's supply, and increase your own. Once they've surpassed a certain amount, your points will flash purple, and you can spend them on an HP attack – an assault on their health gauge. The higher the Bravery, the more powerful the blow; so begins the careful business of meter management.

There are parallels to be drawn here: the damage numbers and double-jumping duels are vaguely reminiscent of *Super Smash Bros*, while the fluidity of dashing around arenas recalls the only good bit of those tedious *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja* titles. In other ways, it snubs comparison. We'd love to confirm that melee blows carry the speed and weight of developer Team Ninja's previous titles, for instance – but they're a little stiff, never quite chaining together properly. And we've never seen a user interface quite as busy as this.

There are times in our demo where a player begins bouncing us against an arena wall, and our character disappears from view underneath our HUD. We're assured, by our faintly embarrassed handler, that the obtrusive setup is a holdover from *Dissidia NT*'s arcade version, and will be pared back in the final release. The alarming amount of camera-wrangling required to reorient ourselves, however, is a more deeply rooted issue. It's done indirectly, experimental squeezes of the left and right triggers switching targets and shifting your view until you land on something workable. It's a clunky solution to what is, at regular intervals, an inelegant game.

There are moments where a brief aerial spat suddenly spirals into a full-blown epic

But then there are the moments where a brief aerial spat suddenly spirals out into a full-blown epic. One particular duel against an enemy Sephiroth is edge-of-our-seat stuff: we keep each other at mid-range, poking at places in the air where the other was half a second ago. Now comfortable with the movement system, we are both in easy control of the 3D space, effortlessly jumping or descending to various heights to disrupt and continue the fight. It feels cutscene-worthy.

As matches fly by and our stats tick up, it's clear that *Dissidia NT* demands patience, skill and tactical nous, rewarding them all handsomely, despite its shallow appearance. Unfortunately, *Dissidia* only becomes accessible after at least a couple of hours of studied play. Doubtless, most will bounce off it – but for *Final Fantasy* fans who are well-used to a time commitment, this could be the brawler they've been patiently waiting for. ■



Core workout

Summons are an iconic part of the *Final Fantasy* series, and perhaps the most thrilling mechanic in *Dissidia NT*. Before matches, teams choose a summon with desirable, often match-winning properties. Shiva increases bravery and freezes foes, for example, while Alexander buffs your team's HP and defence. Attacking cores that spawn around the arena during the fight fills your summon bar: to call your guardian, you must hold down the DualShock's touchpad for a short spell. Communication is essential: your character stops, vulnerable, to summon, but the more team members summoning, the faster it happens. Positioning, timing and smart decision-making are key: there's no point summoning if you're defeated before it can make a difference.



Developer Foam Sword Games
Publisher Double Fine
Format PC, PS4
Origin UK
Release TBA



KNIGHTS & BIKES

Imagination rides wild in this '80s-inspired co-op adventure

When you're a small-town kid, the greatest weapon you can wield is your imagination. If there's a boring job that needs to be done, you can fancy it an epic adventure: delivering a letter becomes a mission to transport a secret code, and tracking down a neighbour a hunt for a rare creature. In *Knights & Bikes*, two friends embark upon a dangerous and magical journey through dungeons and castles on the fictitious, sleepy Cornish island of Penfurzy.

Yet to the diminutive Demelza and her new pal, Nessa, this quaint tourist getaway is a huge battleground. They see everything differently. Bits of lint, pebbles and worms are precious treasures to be hoarded. Grumpy adults have been possessed by malevolent spirits. And their bikes, naturally, are magnificent steeds. Penfurzy is in dire straits, with one of its famous myths exposed as fake. And so the girls set out to uncover the truth and save their home from certain obscurity.

As you might expect from the minds behind such games as *Tearaway* and *LittleBigPlanet*, simply noodling about the hand-painted world of *Knights & Bikes* is a kinetic delight. Tap a button, and our character pedals their pride and joy forward. Stop, and momentum takes over: Nessa stands tall and confident on the pedals, while Demelza splays out her legs, grinning goofily. A pretty flag flutters behind Nessa's pastel-pink ride. If it seems out of place for her tomboyish character, it's meant to – it's motivation, we're told, to upgrade and redecorate it as the game goes on.

In young minds, a junkyard becomes a well-guarded keep that must be raided for treasure, overlaid with imaginary scribbles of detail. A battered chainlink fence is topped with parapets, while irritable crabs tout warrior armour. Sneaking in through a gap in the fence, however, means leaving our bikes behind for a little while. A puzzle involving a crane and an electromagnet – sorry, a helpful wizard in his tower – allows us to lift our bikes into the junkyard. Once we're back in the saddle, one of the girls suggests a race. Last one to the next objective is a rotten egg, essentially, which leads to a gloriously competitive ride as we avoid mud puddles and hold the pedal button to risk a boost around a tricky corner.



We place second by inches – we're racing against developer Rex Crowle, in fairness – and so Crowle wins the fun job of pulling the lever and playing with the next big magnet, but he's willing to let us have a go instead. There's a wonderful effect to the option being left open, not simply restricted to the victor: we counter that Crowle won fair and square, so he should go ahead. It's a charming moment of real communication that reminds us of childhood days spent making up rules for games, learning to share, empathise and reason through play. But there's a disappointing lack of things to do, sometimes, while your co-op pal completes a puzzle. Crowle assures us that he and co-creator Moo Yu are working on ways to keep both players constantly engaged.

Fortunately, there's no such trouble in combat. Indeed, our fight against a boss is defined by the need for constant teamwork.

> ***It reminds us of childhood days spent making up games, learning to share through play***

We find that we're not switching to our frisbee weapon much: this enemy creates multiple fires, restricting space, so we favour Nessa's water balloons. A direct hit to an attacker does damage, but Demelza can also use her wellies to stomp in puddles for a follow-up area-of-effect attack. Soon, we send our foe into the maw of a hungry dragon (read: trash compactor), and the 'treasure' is ours. The difficulty will be in convincing the grown-ups that whatever this bundle of junk is is worth upgrading our tyres. But if our demo of *Knights & Bikes* proves anything, it's that a hefty dose of imagination can transform something ordinary into something to be cherished. ■

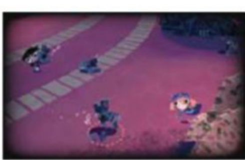


Wild goose chase

While human friendships are messy, and Nessa and Demelza's partnership is tested throughout the game, the girls do have some other companions to rely on. Demelza's pet goose, Captain Honkers, is a particular boon: not only will he nobly stay behind to guard your bikes whenever you must briefly part with them, but his keen olfactory senses mean it's always a good idea to follow his beak if you're unsure what to do next. Foam Sword clearly knows its audience, as it's included an option to feed him treats: follow up with another press of the same button, and you'll give him a quick cuddle.











TOP **The health meter is visible at the bottom of the screen. Damage is logged in the form of cuts and scrapes: a high-five can restore HP.** ABOVE **Locking onto enemies can help make sense of chaos when you're surrounded – as can hopping aboard your bike to ram them.** MAIN **There are multiple things to fish up with the electromagnet, including an old submarine and even an unexploded sea mine**



TOP **You must keep your eyes open for environmental clues. Here, dropping something heavy on the cracked ground will help the girls move forward.** LEFT **Boosting's a useful, but limited resource: both Nessa and Demelza suffer from asthma, meaning they get worn out easily**

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montpellier)
Format Rift, Vive
Origin France
Release 2018





SPACE JUNKIES

Ubisoft Montpellier's VR playspace is shooting for the stars

Space Junkies wasn't always a giddy zero-gravity *Quake* homage in which four players in jetpacks duck and weave through space stations and debris fields. It began life as an attempt to make the experience of VR feel cosy and sociable, rather than a vivid but lonely and physically taxing daydream. Fun as it is to lurk behind an asteroid, clotheslining foes as they pass, some of the game's strongest moments are its least combative. Rotate your wrist while clenching the Oculus Touch side trigger and you'll perform a selection of florid hand gestures. You can also snatch and throw objects in a robust show of networked physics, playing piggy-in-the-middle with a torch in lobby areas. It's representative of a playfulness shooters in general too often lack.

The *Space Junkies* team is small at under 30 staff, but encompasses well over 100 years of development experience. Given a more-or-less open mandate by Ubisoft, it set out to make VR environments more comfortable to roam and interact with. "We said, 'OK, we don't really like floating hands and heads, so



"I have to be able to seamlessly navigate my world – I want to look around"

let's have full embodiment' — full inverse kinematics with no animations," producer **Adrian Lacey** tells us. "It's just positioning your hands one-to-one." The team has striven to avoid common constraints and compromises: rather than a jarring, labour-saving teleport feature, for instance, *Space Junkies* offers smooth 360 degree movement while seated using the Oculus Touch sticks, with the option of a 45-degree snap turn. "We create worlds. I have to be able to seamlessly navigate my world — I want to look around."

The game runs on a proprietary technology, Brigitte, built to ensure a steady 90 frames a second and lightning-quick loading times. "You can't look at your phone in VR, so it's got to be two to three seconds max." Brigitte also allows designers to work inside the simulation, manipulating assets by hand. "One of the big things about building maps in VR is you're in this spherical space, but you don't notice that on a flat screen," Lacey says. "To get that sense of scale and height, you need to be able to see it in VR. So we have an editor where all the levels are actually built in VR, like a little model village, and people jump in, they zoom out, they look around. It's kind of like developing a game for the Wii, and then actually doing it on a keyboard. You have to work with the hardware you have and the constraints of that hardware."

Ubisoft Montpellier dabbled with various social activities in micro-gravity such as repairing machines, before evolving, perhaps inevitably, to combat. "A lot of the guys play *Quake*. We were trying to be, you know, spiritual, but guns are fun!" The star weapon is the slingshot, where you pull back your off-hand while gripping the side trigger to angle the exploding projectile. Reach over your right shoulder and you'll find a sizzling energy sword; reach over your left and you'll find a pop-out shield. There's a fat shotgun whose pump action obliges a cool head under fire, and a machine pistol whose bolts pinball around space station interiors. Aside from its zippy performance, the game lowers the risk of VR motion sickness using a helmet visor that acts as a fixed reference point, and an FOV limiter that tightens your perspective during fast movement and collisions.

Thus far, *Space Junkies* is a game of simple, throwback (and forth) pleasures that speaks to the growing body of VR development techniques in play and what happens when they are gracefully brought together. "We try a little bit of everything," Lacey says. "You don't get a chance to do that very often — it's these shifts in the market that allow you to do that prototyping and testing and challenging how you work." ■





Birds in the hand

For Ubisoft Montpellier's Adrian Lacey, being able to manipulate everything in a VR world is both crucial and a headache. "If you see an object in VR, you have to be able to touch it and play with it. Otherwise, it feels very weird. In a normal game on TV, you might have a contextual command, you go and your character presses the button. Well, here you have to physically press the button, grab the handle and turn it. And we had to be very cautious, because once you start replicating those physics, it can be a nightmare. There's a balance to find. There's a point where you can't just make physically enabled objects everywhere, so we had to be very tight. It's a framerate-first mentality."

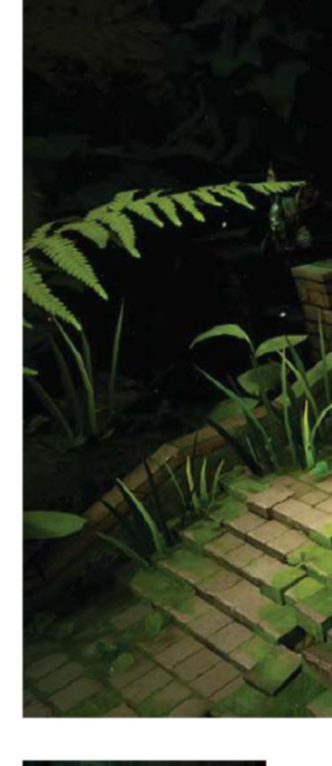
TOP **You can hold a gun in either hand – let go, and it'll drift back to its holster on your hip. Bulkier toys, such as the shotgun, can also be wielded in one hand, at the cost of being able to reload**

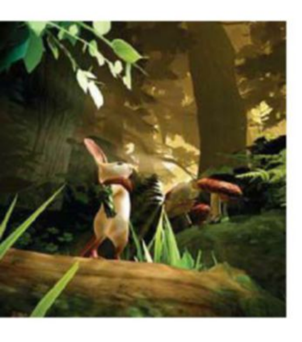
TOP **Hurling a health pack to a friend is a stylish way of turning the tables, but you'll need a free hand, and an opponent can always intercept it in flight.**
ABOVE **Performed simply by rolling your wrists, the emotes are a joy and presumably of some interest to Oculus owner Facebook as it looks to make socialising in VR feel like second nature.**
RIGHT **Turning 180 degrees is ponderous, so catching an opponent from behind is often decisive. When ambushed, you'll want to accelerate and weave toward cover, rather than spinning on the spot**



Developer/publisher Polyarc
Format PSVR
Origin US
Release February







Old LucasArts adventure games were an inspiration for the team when designing *Moss*' screen-to-screen traversal system

MOSS

Polyarc's debut adventure lends VR a different perspective

Leaving a hugely successful studio to work on a whole new medium may be the definition of leaving one's comfort zone, yet for the former Bungie staff who founded Polyarc, comfort remains the cornerstone of the studio's debut VR title *Moss*.

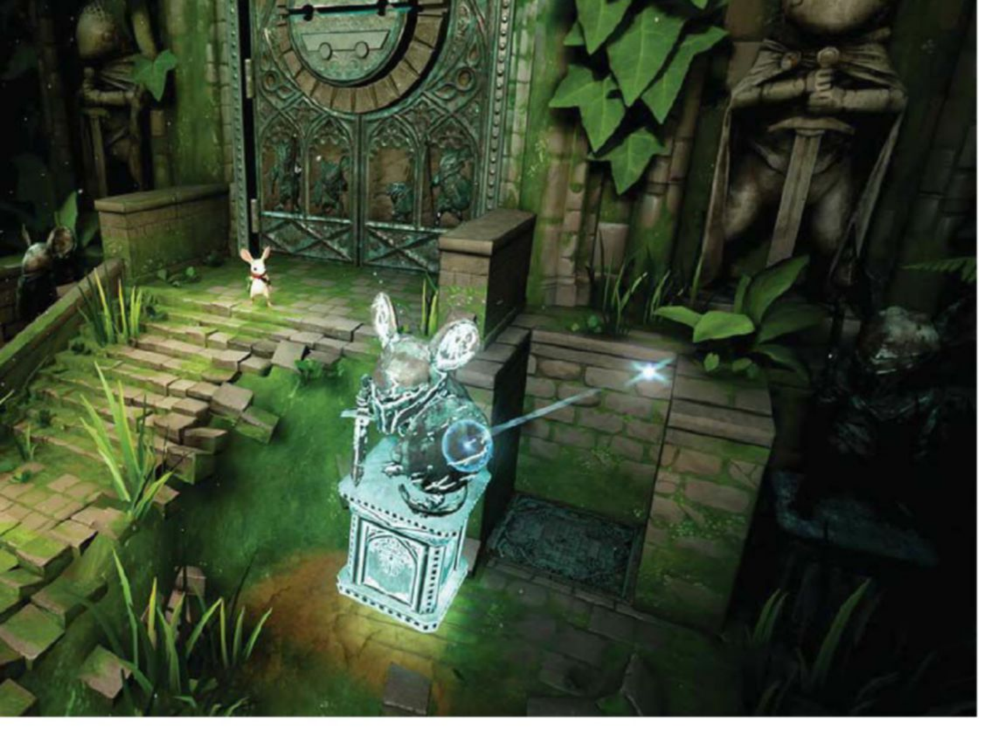
"That really formed the art style," Polyarc art director **Chris Alderson** tells us. "You'll notice when you're in the game's lush forest environments – it's very open, and the colours are very warm." That's accentuated by the adorable rodent protagonist Quill, who we first hear from the rustle of foliage before she pokes out from the trees and notices our interloping presence. Unintimidated, she approaches and offers a friendly welcome. "It's all to make you feel good and invited."

A puzzle adventure may seem a departure for a team whose past credits include *Halo 3: ODST*, *Halo: Reach* and *Destiny*, but *Moss* was born of more than just a desire to start afresh. "When we decided to take the plunge into VR, we asked ourselves, 'What makes a good VR game?'" **Danny Bulla**, design director, explains. "We quickly came to the idea of interacting within this space in front of you physically, and with a character that can react to you. Quick-paced action [in VR], even for us, would make us feel uncomfortable when we're playing. It's not enjoyable."



ABOVE **Combat is fairly rudimentary, with a quick-dodge available when pressing jump right after an attack, though the ability to physically get involved adds an extra dimension**





LEFT **The environments hint at an old civilisation of rodent warriors, though Polyarc remains tight-lipped about just what characters we can expect to encounter**



Avoiding locomotion issues altogether, Moss uses a fixed camera, but lean in for a closer look and you can see upcoming or past areas in the distance. "It's been useful to think about it like a little stage; you don't control the camera, but you do get to control what it's showing, and the action that's taking place," studio director **Tam Armstrong** tells us. It's also an apt fit for the narrative device of playing through an enchanted storybook, with the sound of pages turning as we progress. "Thematically, it all wraps together," Armstrong says, "and accomplishes the goal of making you comfortable at the same time."

"Quick-paced action in VR, even for us, would make us uncomfortable when playing"

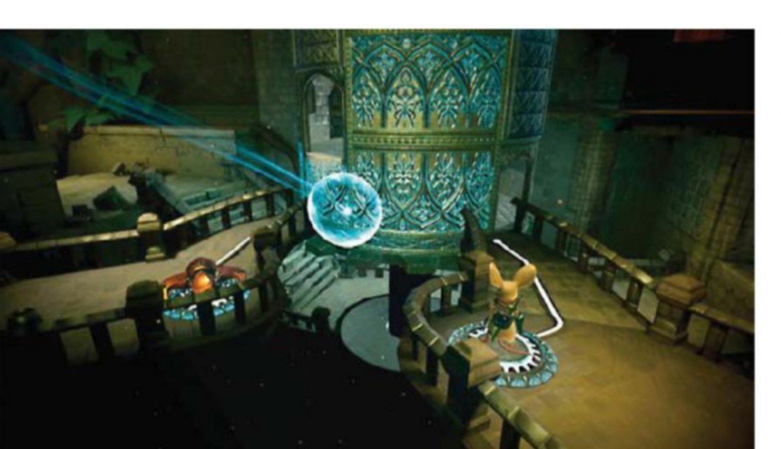
Comfort is a factor the team is keen to stress, then. But more important for gameplay is physical presence and interaction. While we control Quill with the stick and face buttons, it becomes more interesting with the DualShock's motion functions. Reaching out and squeezing the trigger to grab an object, we pull blocks, open huge doors and move heavy statues that would be otherwise impossible for Quill. Our omniscience extends to combat, where in one section we hold down some beetle enemies for Quill to finish off with her sword. If she takes damage, we can even reach out and hold her to heal her.

These are satisfying touches but also reminiscent of Media Molecule's *Tearaway Unfolded*, which had inventive ways of using the DualShock to create physical interactions between player and character – all without a VR headset. It begs the question of why *Moss* is only playable in VR. "That physical experience is core to the design," Armstrong says. "We made a lot of decisions that are sort of possible to do on another platform but are the *best*, in our opinion, when done in VR."

Our demo ends by teasing a towering serpentine foe from the shadows, suggesting more epic challenges in store. Polyarc isn't giving much away about the narrative, though an estimated playthrough of a couple of hours may disappoint those hoping that PSVR's second generation of software will yield games of a more substantial length.

While Armstrong insists rich, dense content is the priority, with hidden collectibles providing replay incentive, Bulla is more hopeful of the game's wider appeal. "One of the benefits of being on a new medium is that experience we all got when we first opened a SNES, and we'd show our neighbours, our friends and our parents. That's going to be the experience that people will have with VR as they purchase it: they want to show it off, they want to share it. The world of *Moss* itself is somewhere we found where people just like to experience and hang out with Quill." From what we've seen so far, they're not wrong. ■

This is one of the more intricate puzzles in the demo, though Quill is also happy to offer a hint for struggling players



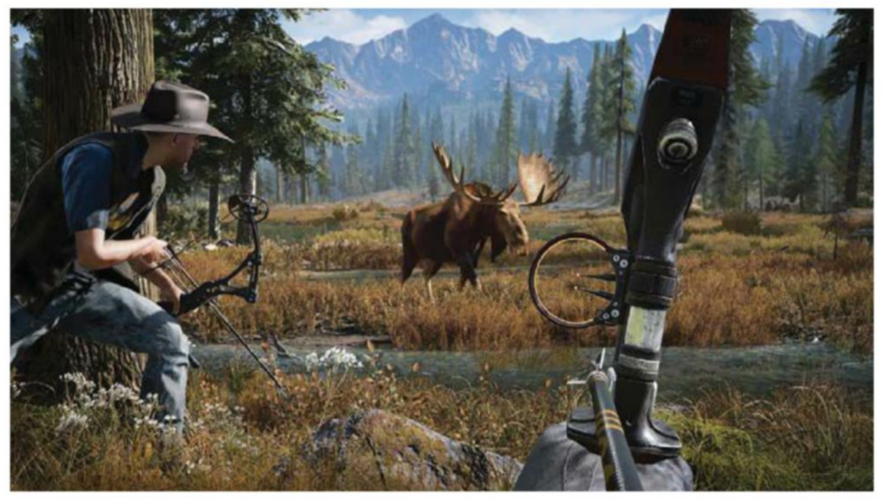
Signing on

Despite being able to stand upright and wield a sword, Quill's anthropomorphisms stop short of human speech. Instead, her primary means of communication is through gestures, mimes and even American Sign Language, the latter demonstrated by a tweet from one of Polyarc's animators. "These are Quill's techniques for communicating with you with regard to her immediate needs or her status," Armstrong tells us. "If you spend a bit too long on a puzzle, she'll try and help you solve it." Although our eagerness to solve puzzles means we miss most of these moments on the first playthrough, there's rarely been a better excuse to leave the controller idle.



FAR CRY 5

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Canada **Release** March 27



Ubisoft Montreal's definitely-not-a-comment-on-the-alt-right-please-buy-our-game has been given an extra month in the controversy-shy oven, but we see no cause for concern. It's just one of a few Ubi games to slip a little, its publisher presumably thinking that the bizarrely positive reception to the year-late *Assassin's Creed Origins* means delays are now a hallmark of polished quality. Regardless, we're well on board; our hopes that the development team will finally decide to open up about the game's seemingly obvious message, however, seem sure to be dashed. Heaven forbid you offend life's bigots, hmm?

OVERKILL'S THE WALKING DEAD

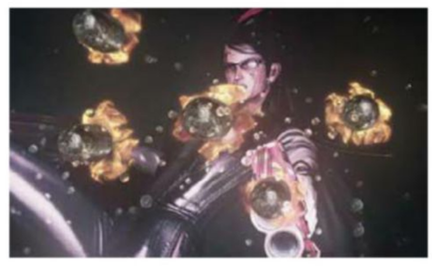
Developer Overkill Software **Publisher** 505 Games, Starbreeze **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Sweden **Release** Autumn



Time's rather running out for Overkill's take on Robert Kirkman's zombie-infested universe. Announced in 2014, long before apathy set in towards both Telltale's games and the AMC show, things have rather changed. The newly revealed survivor seems an affable sort, but his weapon of choice – a bloodied baseball bat studded with nails – is the worst possible of looks given events in the TV show. You might as well put a helmet on him, and call him Darth Aidan.

BAYONETTA 3

Developer PlatinumGames **Publisher** Nintendo
Format Switch **Origin** Japan **Release** TBA



With *Scalebound* now dead, is this Hideki Kamiya's next project? With the Osaka studio enjoying success with *Nier: Automata*, we suspect that Kamiya fancies a return to the limelight. Sign us up; in the meantime, a Switch compendium of the first two games, due in February, will do nicely.

VACATION SIMULATOR

Developer/publisher Owlchemy Labs **Format** PSVR, Rift, Vive
Origin US **Release** 2018



Well, yes, obviously. How else are you supposed to follow up a game called *Job Simulator*? Owlchemy Labs' second VR experiment once again uses a mundane premise to do mad, mad things despite ostensibly being there to do something else. Dumb, playful, weirdly essential fun, then, just like before.

THE STATIONEERS

Developer/publisher Rocketwerkz **Format** PC
Origin New Zealand **Release** TBA



Dean Hall's made a game! It's not *Ion*, the space-survival sim announced at E3 2015; that's dead. Now in Early Access, *The Stationeers* you operate complex systems to maintain a space station. Whatever the problems it presents, none will be so hard as Hall's never-ending battle to ship a finished game.

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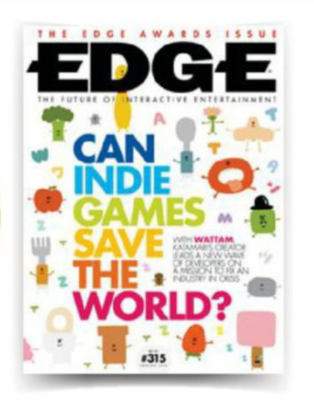
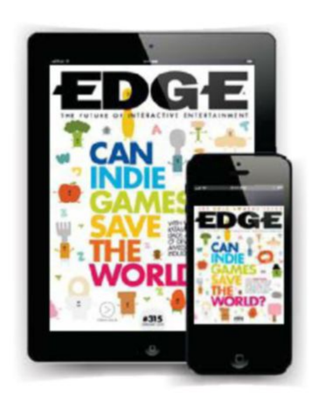




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#315

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY







AMID SCANDAL OVER LOOT BOXES AND AGGRESSIVE MONETISATION, PLAYERS ARE STRUGGLING TO PUT THEIR TRUST IN VIDEOGAMES. CAN KEITA TAKAHASHI AND A NEW WAVE OF INDIE DEVELOPERS MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE?

By Jen Simpkins and Nathan Brown











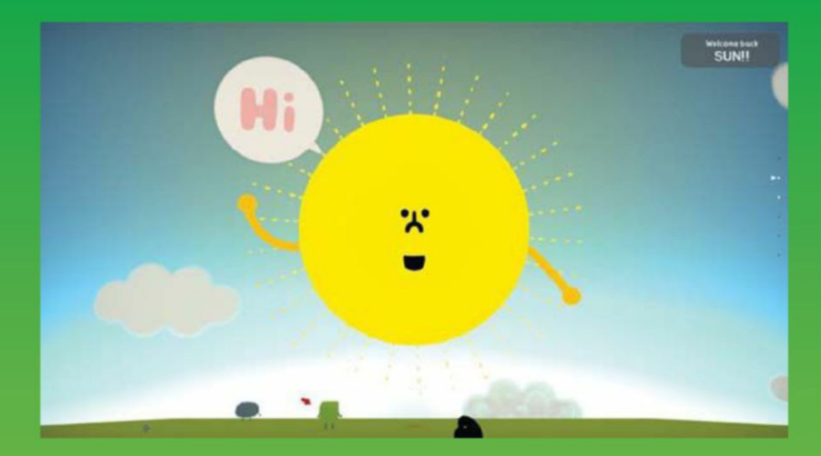


The world needs *Wattam* right now, a game about logical processes and the natural order of things. A seed sprouts into a tree; it drops fruit, which is eaten by a mouth, and the resulting effluent goes in the toilet. It is nonsense, certainly: we expect nothing less from the brain of *Katamari Damacy* creator Keita Takahashi. But it is nonsense that works, that fits together, and when the world outside makes progressively less sense with each passing day, it feels absolutely vital.

Videogames have never been bigger, yet things have rarely felt so bleak. Some of the industry's most powerful companies seem to be more focused on taking more of a customer's money than rewarding their initial investment. Others use dirty tricks to slow our progress, or fail to follow through on their promises, or launch with a mess they blithely intend to patch later on. The year 2017 was shaping up to be one of the greatest – perhaps *the* greatest – in videogame history, yet it has ended in acrimony and scandal, its triumphant peaks clouded over by games that seek not to delight, but to bilk us.

Yet there is hope, both within games and out in the real world. You just have to look a little harder for it. Away from the investor calls, the two-year content plans and the impenetrably complex monetisation strategies, indie studios continue to quietly change the world. In small teams, they playfully experiment with established conventions. Some eschew violence, tiring of a world that already feels brutal enough, and an industry that loves to sell nothing more than death. Others explore challenging themes, or impart messages that the big boys, with their armies of PR flaks and their multimillion-copy sales targets, would never dare to touch. For some it's simply enough to let the sun shine in a medium that prefers dark, post-apocalyptic skies. They've been doing this for years, of course. But we need them now, more than ever.

Above all, they're not out to stiff you. They're here with a simple, irresistible offer: they want you to buy their games, and they want to make you happy. After years working largely in the shadows of larger studios with bigger megaphones, it's time for indie games to take centre stage. It's time for indie games to save the world.



Solving puzzles is all very well, but *Wattam* often encourages interaction for interaction's sake. You can press a button when next to another character to just say, "Hi", proffering a cheery wave as you do so



A nose wandering about alone is odd, but when other features appear, things become stacks more fun. Another of *Wattam*'s themes is the importance of bringing different kinds of people together







***Wattam* won't do** that alone, naturally. Yet it sits at the vanguard of the contemporary indie scene, a collaboration between **Keita Takahashi** and **Robin Hunicke**. The former made *Katamari Damacy* which, while made with backing from publisher Namco, helped lay the foundations for the post-millennial indie-game movement. It was playful, silly, cool as all get out, and had a deeper, environmentalist message that you could either engage with or entirely ignore. Hunicke, meanwhile, helped make *Journey*, one of the biggest indie successes to date, one of the first games to take equal prominence on an E3 stage with games made to eight-figure budgets. *Katamari* was about using chaos to form a sort of order; *Journey* was about the beauty of companionship and working together. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Wattam* is about both.

Its premise is unexpectedly tragic. You begin the tale as Mayor, an affable green cube in a hat who, following a war that drives away the world's entire population, finds himself desperately lonely. A storm initially provides him with some company – but it's when he discovers a bomb under his hat that the real fun begins. Pressing a button has Mayor whip off his headwear to reveal the explosive: another press and it detonates, sending him and everybody nearby flying off into the air in an explosion of confetti and laughter. The noise is heard across the universe, encouraging departed friends to return, the arrival of each anthropomorphic object heralded by a joyous proclamation: "Welcome back!"

Explode enough stuff and, very quickly, the screen is filled with bizarre beings. A set of cutlery and a mouth; a walking toilet; a bowling pin named Deborah. Attracting these idiosyncratic sorts is the key to progress, for each one – when selected and controlled – has its own unique talent that continues a chain of visual free-association. The mouth will eat fruit at a press of a button (provided you can catch it: required objects have a habit of running away, giggling madly). The toilet can pick up the piles of excrement produced and dunk it into its own head. Flush it, and its cheerful load will spin down the pipes, only to pop out, newly golden, from a pipe that your baffled co-op playmate might be currently controlling. Deborah, meanwhile, demands that you have objects climb each other to create a stack as tall as her: only then may a bowling ball be summoned from the sky to knock her down and continue the chain.

It's a game about bringing people together. Indeed, it works best played with somebody else, as you both switch between unruly objects and have them hold hands, dragging and herding them together before exploding them again. Some solutions are obvious: a patch of ground seems the perfect home for a rowdy acorn, and a gaggle of fragrant flowers suitable for a giant nose. Other elements are less predictable, and all the funnier for it. There are moments in our demo where we and our partner are briefly stumped, normally because we've forgotten to blow something up. Fortunately, *Wattam*'s population will occasionally force the issue, bursting into anguished tears and declaring, "I just want to explode – kaboom with me!"





Funomena's Keita Takahashi (top) and Robin Hunicke

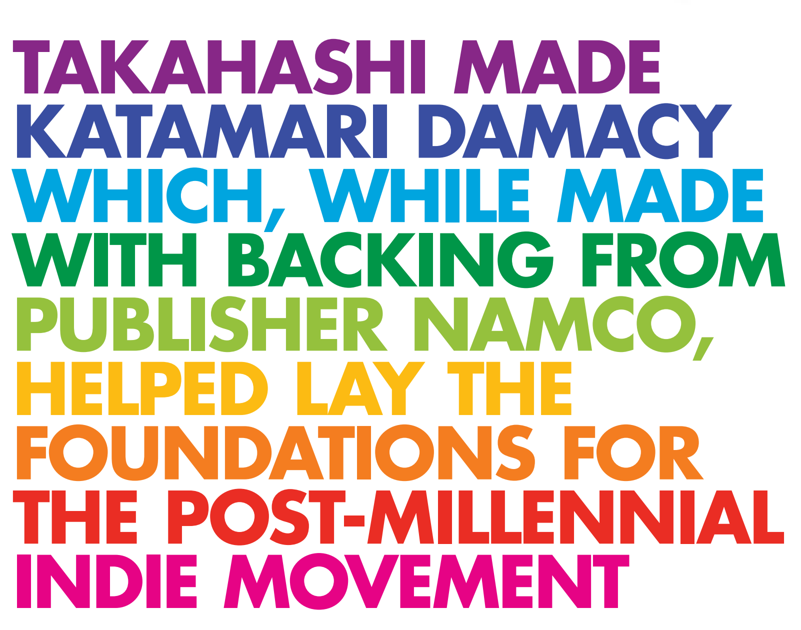
Things are alternately logical and nonsensical. Coincidentally – or not, perhaps – since making *Katamari*, Takahashi has become a father. "I have two kids, three and six years old. They're super annoying," Takahashi says. "But I'm always observing how they move, or how they express their emotions. When they laugh and when they cry, it's so different from grown-ups. They change their emotions like *that*." He snaps his fingers. "It's annoying, but it's also a great reaction." Long-time friend and co-worker Hunicke agrees: "I really do think that having a family, and seeing kids all the time, has changed Keita, in a way that's very obvious in the game itself. Children have this capacity for experiencing feelings that is very admirable. When you get older you learn to cover your feelings, or pretend you don't have them, or act cool." *Wattam* is certainly not concerned with being cool – and neither is Takahashi, who when asked to describe his indie-game philosophy responds, with careful emphasis on every word: "Don't. Follow. Trend."





"Keita moves against the grain, always," Hunicke says. He doesn't see himself as cool, either, preferring to label himself "childish", his subversiveness always playful – hence *Wattam*'s confetti bombs. "When I was playing with my kids, stacking blocks, they'd always break the stack I made, and laugh," he says. "Create it and break it: it's a very fun, iconic moment." Hence *Wattam*'s surprisingly elegant physics system, which is frequently required for puzzle-solving and has been





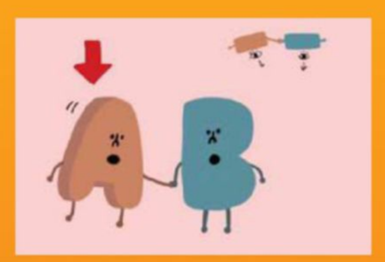




Takahashi wants players to cry when they finish *Wattam*. With happiness or sadness? "I'm not sure. Maybe happiness?" he says. "Crying is always a bit of both," Hunicke says. Later, Takahashi goes on to clarify: "I think I just want to say, 'Hey! This is life! Wake up!'"

ABOVE **Mayor can change shape to suit a variety of situations. Some of Takahashi's concept sketches show ideas for Mayor as a pile of pages, or as part of a stackable rainbow.**
RIGHT **Explosions are key to moving forward, but only Mayor can trigger his hat bomb at will. Put on his hat as another character – all too easy on accident when everybody's transforming into the same thing – and you'll be gently reprimanded with a useless detonation.**
BELOW **Our demo's action plays out on a giant, sleepy grass block that sits atop Wattam's "universe globe". We can only wonder where Mayor will head next**





Coloured arrows show you and your co-op partner's current character selection. It can be fiddly to swap between, and the screen gets too hectic to see things properly at times, but the characters' names help distinguish them





fiendishly tricky for Funomena to develop. "It's actually taken us quite a long time to build the game, because on a technical level, it is incredibly difficult to do what Keita wanted us to do," Hunicke says. "The climbing, the stacking of arbitrary objects of arbitrary scale with each other while they're also animating and executing all their AI… For a team of seven, the technical challenges are quite large. And yet, when you look at it, it looks so simple, so easy – it's a baby game."

Not everything about *Wattam* is so easily pigeonholed, then – not least because, even more so than a *Katamari* or a *Journey*, the game defies categorisation. More than anything, it feels profoundly social, a game to bring friends and strangers together on the couch through silliness and hand-holding and surprises. But, like *Katamari* before it, *Wattam*'s playfulness masks its subtexts – messages that feel essential, given the current state of the world. It's all in the surreal language of Takahashi: this is a creator who made a game about rolling up pushpins and continents partially in response to both the ruination of the environment and the inhumanity of 9/11.

Wattam confronts tough themes, too, at times. "I know I was having real concerns about using a bomb, because you know, a bomb is so bad," Takahashi says. "We still have many terrorists, and bombing is happening still. But this is kind of challenging." For Takahashi, creating the mechanic was a chance to turn the bomb on its head, to rob it of its power by recontextualising it as a kind of language – just as he's seen English, he tells us, help people of different nationalities at Funomena look past their differences. "We might be able to tell people, what if all the bombs in the world changed into more fun bombs, like fireworks or something? This world would be more peaceful." In *Wattam*, explosions don't tear the world apart, but put it back together.

It feels like something only Takahashi would come up with. During our conversation, we get the sense that it is sometimes difficult for him to unpick the way his mind works, or where the ideas come from. "I can't tell. Of course I can't tell. But for me, it's very obvious, right?" His Twitter account is filled with celebratory pictures of obvious things, mundane objects of the sort that feature in *Wattam*, sometimes with little faces sketched onto them. "He just goes around and he looks at stuff and he sees things, you know. He's actually *looking*," Hunicke says. "I mean, how often are you really looking, you know? Like, you see a tree, but you're not really *looking* at it. In your mind you have this idea of what's real. And maybe that's how the game is, a little bit." Indeed, in *Wattam*, a tiny rock is just a tiny rock, until we leave it unattended for five minutes and come back to discover it's pinched two gigantic petal hats from its now-naked flower pals. Humdrum things are made to feel briefly extraordinary. "Another theme of *Wattam* is respect for our ordinary life," Takahashi says. "How much we need this stupid, boring table, or this cup, or utensils. It's boring, but we need it. But people get so used to their existence. It's a very obvious thing, but very precious. Having life is unbelievable – kind of a miracle.

"*Wattam* is about life," he continues. "I know that *Wattam* doesn't have any strong mechanics like *Noby Noby Boy* or *Katamari*. But life is about so many small things having an effect. It's getting very unclear, not so easy to understand – which is bad for commercial games, but for some reason, I'm still trying to make such a game." The subject has shifted from the appreciation of modern life, of telephones and tables, to existence itself. Is the world so bad right now because people have forgotten to respect life? "I think people don't pay attention," says Hunicke. "They're engaged in distraction. They're numb. Looking at their phones." She mimes swiping. "'Do they like me? Do they like me? Can I buy it? Can I buy it?' They're just not looking up.

"It's a videogame, so maybe most people won't see the subtext. But the people who see it, see it. And that's why you make art. That's why you make anything. You really like drawing, or to make music, or whatever. It doesn't really matter if you run a restaurant, or you're a world-famous sculptor – you're just making the work because the work helps you live. It's part of your process." Sensing that we might be building up him and his exploding, defecating, hand-holding game a little too much, Takahashi steers talk away from higher concepts. "I'm not a teacher, I'm not a coach. I just want to make a fun game – through a different way, a different way from the current."

"IT'S A VIDEOGAME, SO MAYBE PEOPLE WON'T SEE THE SUBTEXT. BUT THE PEOPLE WHO SEE IT, SEE IT. THAT'S WHY YOU MAKE ART. THAT'S WHY YOU MAKE ANYTHING"

LIGHTBULB MOMENT

While indie developers have to concern themselves with every aspect of a game's development and release, they also face a daily battle to keep the lights on. And even developers of Takahashi and Hunicke's calibre would struggle to survive without support. Funomena was originally based in Vancouver, where it was able to avail itself of Canada's generous taxation policy for videogame companies; since the move to San Francisco it has benefited from support of a different kind. "People have been so kind to us about *Wattam*, and given us so much – not just money, but also time and expertise," Hunicke says. "We wouldn't be alive as a company if it weren't for people caring about what we're doing, and believing that we should do it. As long as Keita and his family can eat, have a roof over their head, do creative things and have a good time, then I'm doing my job. But it's not always easy, and I would be lying if I said it was. We've definitely had a lot of help."





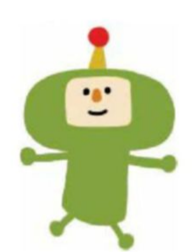


RIGHT ***Noby Noby Boy*** **was a double pun in Takahashi's his native tongue. 'Nobi' means 'stretch'; 'nobinobi' translates to 'carefree'.**
BELOW **Takahashi's game** ***Tenya Wanya Teens*** **is an installation piece; it only exists on a single cabinet using custom controllers**





ABOVE ***Katamari Damacy*** **was Takahashi's breakout game, though it was sadly never released in Europe.**
LEFT ***Journey*****'s meditative qualities made it an odd, but essential fit among Sony's big-budget line-up**





Takahashi is too modest to consider himself a figurehead of the indie scene, but that's okay – we'll do it for him, and so will his peers. "He doesn't talk that much, but everything he says is really interesting," says **Ben Esposito**, the lone developer of *Donut County*, which owes, to put it mildly, a certain debt to Takahashi's debut. "His perspective on the world always surprises me, and every time I get a chance to hear his thoughts on what it means to make a game, what it means to play, and how valuable that is, it's always really inspiring."

For **Nathan Vella**, president of Capy Games, the Toronto studio behind *Swords & Sworcery EP* and the forthcoming *Below*, it's not just what Takahashi says, but what it represents. "[*Katamari*] was very much Keita's, instead of a game made by a whole bunch of people with some PR folks in front of them. We've always seen creators speak about their games, but never one that was that weird, or personal. That was the first time we saw someone like that – out in front of a big game, that was really a small game.

"And he was different from most of the other figureheads. He was quiet, and introspective, and you could tell he would probably rather not be talking about the game, but also felt like it was important for him to do it. Everyone else we'd seen was pretty much looking for that limelight. That sort of introspective, create-for-myself mentality is pretty prevalent amongst independent developers, especially the ones who were around earlier on."

As Vella hints, however, it's no longer enough to simply make a game by yourself. Anyone can do that these days, and so the concept of an 'indie spirit' has transcended the classic notion of a lone developer, dreaming big in a small room. While *Katamari* was in part born of Takahashi's desire to process his feelings in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks, it was driven primarily by a desire to make something that didn't already exist. That's come to typify his work since, in the experimental abandon of his mobile debut *Noby Noby Boy*, in the one-of-a-kind arcade game *Tenya Wanya Teens*, and now in *Wattam*. Beyond that, it's perhaps the essence of today's indie movement. It is no longer about how you develop a game, but what you choose to make instead.

To see the benefits of this approach, we must look to the other end of the budgetary scale. Two games, in development at major studios and currently slated for 2018, have a rare opportunity within games of their size: to pass withering comment on the current state of the world. Yet David Cage insists there is nothing of Black Lives Matter in *Detroit: Become Human*, a game about a repressed underclass rising up against inequality. Ubisoft's Dan Hay, meanwhile, claims that *Far Cry 5* – set in the present-day midwest, its aggressors a hardline religious cult – is not a commentary on Trump's America. Neither man's claims ring entirely true. Esposito points out that "you can't make something without a subtext; whether or not you're aware of it, you're a product of your time, your situation and your life experience." Okay, perhaps it's hard to make a game with a strong political message when hundreds of people are making it – thousands, in Ubisoft's case, stationed all around the world – but why downplay what feels like a marketable asset? To Vella, it's easy to understand.





Capy Games president Nathan Vella (top) and *Super Meat Boy Forever* creator Tommy Refenes

"It's exceptionally hard to make a game that has to sell millions of copies, that costs hundreds of million dollars," he says. "To recoup on that is so challenging that it puts pressure on people. I think a lot of developers have a lot to say, but are not allowed to, or are afraid to, because of those reasons. You don't want to be the one that says something that causes a game to sell poorly and make all your friends lose their jobs."



The reality, of course, is that downplaying a game's perceived relevance to real-world events can have the opposite effect; that by seeking to avoid offending anyone, you make your game less appealing, and sell less anyway. For indies, Vella believes the opportunity that creates is clear. "Whether they're working for a huge studio or a small studio, are independent or corporate-owned, developers want their games to have a positive impact. They don't want these things to be black holes of intelligence, or of message. But one side of the coin can use that to their advantage, whereas to the other it has the potential to become a massive deterrent. I think that, at the end, PR does define that." So being indie means a willingness, not just to make games with risky or simply uncommon themes, but being prepared to go out and talk about them, unencumbered by the easily scared PR firewall that holds developers at many bigger studios back.



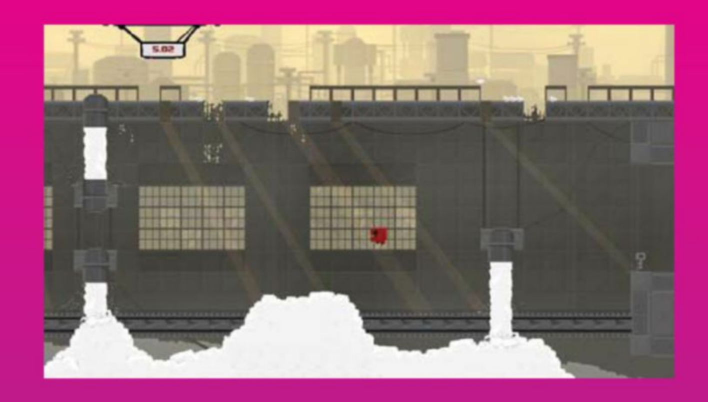


It doesn't need to be overtly political, of course. *Wattam*'s undertones are easy to overlook, after all. And many players missed, or chose to ignore, that *Katamari Damacy* was a game about the impact humanity's clutter was having on the environment, and simply enjoyed a crazy game about rolling up life's detritus into a big ball while listening to mad Japanese house music. Being indie may mean it's easier for you to be daring tonally, but that doesn't mean you have to do it. Yet it's clear from the developers we speak to that there's an ethical layer to the way they think about the games they make. In an era where big publishers see the $60 price tag on a new release as simply the starting station of the money train, indies are taking a markedly different approach – despite the fact that the need to keep roofs over a few people's heads is arguably a more pressing concern than making a rich investor a bit richer through loot-box sales.

Money is uppermost in the current thoughts of **Tommy Refenes**. Co-creator of *Super Meat Boy*, ▶

PLAYGROUND GAMES

Takahashi feels he was misquoted, or misunderstood, when it was widely reported he had quit videogames. While he was disenchanted with life at Namco, he merely quit so he could also work on other things – including what remains his most unexpected project to date. Sadly, a planned children's playground at Woodthorpe Grange in Nottingham was never completed. Featuring such innovations as a circular 'donut slide', Takahashi wanted his park to be "somewhere everyone could play – kids, parents, dogs". He still hopes to complete it one day – but, as Hunicke tells it, perhaps it's for the best that he doesn't. "That park will kill children! It's filled with great ideas, but it will cost $50 million. All that insurance… that's what kills good ideas, insurance."



LEFT ***Super Meat Boy* was one of the earliest XBLA success stories, selling a million copies in a year.** BELOW **Many indie games are inspired by Katamari, but none is so overt as Annapurna's *Donut County***



RIGHT **Capy's *Below* signalled Microsoft's commitment to indie games in the Xbox One era. Announced at E3 back in 2013, it's yet to release, though Vella assures us an update is imminent**

the poster child of the XBLA indie gold rush, he's now working on *Super Meat Boy Forever*, which will also launch on mobile – which brings with it a certain assumption in terms of how it will be financed. When Refenes was asked on Twitter if the game would be free, he replied: "Are you fucking high?" Yet he needs to strike a balance between shooting himself in the foot, and pricing himself out of the market.

"I do think about it, especially because mobile is very much centred on drawing in a player and drawing as much money out of them as possible," he says. "*Meat Boy* would fit into that market perfectly. You want to beat the boss? You gotta get a boss ticket. You just died; pay a dollar to get 100 more lives. I could easily do that, and honestly, I would probably make more money than on any of the other platforms.

"Very early in my career, when I was doing website stuff, I was offered a job on porn websites. It paid $120,000 a year, and I was, like, 22. I barely considered it because I was like, 'I don't want to do a porn website, I feel like that's going to mess me up'. I have the same feeling when it comes to making *Meat Boy Forever* mobile. It's like, at what *actual* cost?"

Yet still, it leaves him in a quandary, and leads us to the downside of making games on a small scale; you have to do all this stuff yourself. Were Refenes making *Meat Boy Forever* for a big publisher, the pricing decision would be made several pay grades above his head. Perhaps there's something to be said for being able to focus on the job you're good at, without worrying about everything else. It feels instructive that, after a period where self-publishing was the norm among indies, publishers are once again proving their value. The likes of Devolver Digital, 505 Games and Annapurna Interactive can help lighten the load of PR, distribution, localisation and so on. Yet the real value of partnering with a publisher is that it can help solve what, it quickly becomes clear, is the most pressing concern among today's indie developers: discovery.

The number of new games released on Steam in 2016 accounted for 40 per cent of the platform's entire lifetime catalogue at that point. Even more were added in 2017: 6,000 by November, compared to 4,500 throughout the previous year. Over on mobile, it is expected that the iOS App Store catalogue will pass the five million mark by 2020. Console storefronts may not be seeing quite the same, but there's nonetheless a steady feed of new releases on PS4, Xbox One and Switch. How are indie games to save the world if no one sees them?

"There are a ton of really good games competing for a small amount of promotion – a small amount of dashboard space – and the platforms that hold the keys just don't have the ability to promote everyone," Capy's Vella says. "As a result we're seeing a lot of





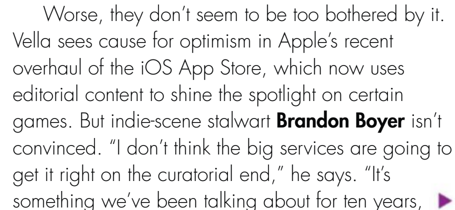
***Knights & Bikes* and *Tearaway* creator Rex Crowle (top) and Venus Patrol's Brandon Boyer**



really great games flying under the radar because they launched on the same day as another, huger game, or in the same week as two really good triple-A games that have already taken up the best slots on a dashboard. It's a very, very challenging market right now, and even though I believe there are more great games than ever, I think more great games are failing than ever, as well. We're competing against triple-A games for the same slots, the same promotion, and we don't have the money to pay for it if we can't get it."

See for yourself: load up the download store on your platform of choice. You'll probably have to dig pretty deep before you find an indie game, those big carousel spots occupied by the new big-budget releases of the day – or perhaps an old one that just got a new update or a discount. It doesn't matter if you already own it; you're getting an ad for it anyway, because somewhere behind the scenes a contract has been signed. While they may look a little fancier – using higher-res artwork, perhaps, or autoplaying a video – these are at heart the same storefront interfaces we've been using since the 360 era, when Microsoft tightly controlled the flow of games on Xbox Live Arcade. Now it's a flood, and the platform holders can't keep up.





Worse, they don't seem to be too bothered by it. Vella sees cause for optimism in Apple's recent overhaul of the iOS App Store, which now uses editorial content to shine the spotlight on certain games. But indie-scene stalwart **Brandon Boyer** isn't convinced. "I don't think the big services are going to get it right on the curatorial end," he says. "It's something we've been talking about for ten years, ▶

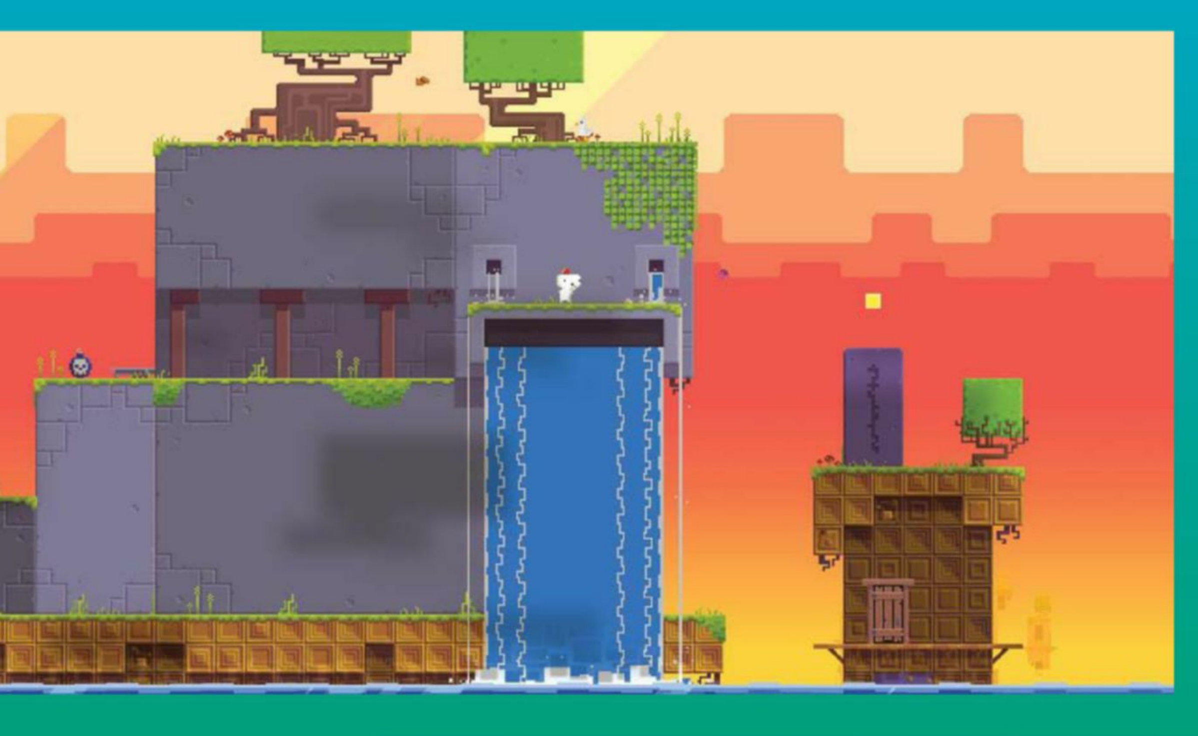








LEFT ***Knights & Bikes*** **is being made by Crowle and fellow Media Molecule alumnus Moo Yu. After a successful Kickstarter campaign, it was signed by publisher Double Fine**



LEFT ***Fez*** **remains one of the definitive examples of an indie game, a labour of love that took years to make. A planned sequel was sadly cancelled after developer Phil Fish tired of game-industry negativity**

RIGHT **Vella says *Firewatch* is an example of indie-game marketing done right. "If it was directed by a larger company, we would have talked about the adventure; there would have been blazing fires and all this crazy action"**





"AS MUCH AS I'D LIKE IT TO BE TRUE THAT INDIE GAMES CAN SAVE THE WORLD, IT REQUIRES A LOT OF PEOPLE TO COME AROUND TO THE IDEA OF SUPPORTING INDIE DEVELOPERS"

and it's not coming, and algorithms aren't the answer. Apple's doing a better job by putting editorial focus on games, but there's also a million algorithmic things they're doing really poorly." Or, to put it bluntly: "For as much as the world is fucked, it's kind of fucked for indie developers too."

Boyer is a fixture of the US scene. He's advanced the indie cause at **Edge**, Gamasutra, Boing Boing's indie-game offshoot *Offworld* and its Kickstarted successor *Venus Patrol*. He's a former chairman of the Independent Games Festival. These days he's the curator of Texas festival Fantastic Arcade and a board member of the Austin gamedev collective Juegos Rancheros. He's been there since the start, and he's worried.

"It was so much easier when I was doing *Offworld*, or even in the early days of IGF, to get a groundswell of support around, say, a *Spelunky*. It's just fractally, infinitesimally harder to get people to care about *anything* these days. As much as I'd like it to be true that indie games can save the world, I think it requires a lot of people to come around to the idea of supporting indie developers."

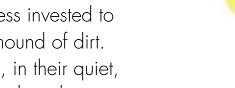
How, then, to fix it? Predictably, everyone we speak to has their own suggestion. Vella wants the Apple approach to spread, with the gatekeepers putting more effort into editorial curation of the games on their platform. Boyer wants the same from the media, believing it's no longer possible for broad-church outlets to shine a light on everything that deserves it – ouch – and calling for more specially focused websites to step into the void. **Rex Crowle**, the former Media Molecule creative director who is now making the cheery, friendship-themed adventure *Knights & Bikes* for Double Fine, points to the segmentally focused apps available on Apple TV: "They're all targeting in a slightly different way: one has the arthouse films, then there's Hopster which is for kids. Maybe they're pulling from similar libraries, but the content is themed in a certain way." Refenes thinks it's on developers to get better at marketing their own wares, though perhaps that's easy to say when you're working with something of the profile of a *Meat Boy*.

Yet they all omit one thing from the equation, and it's probably the biggest one of all. We all, as players of games, need to do more to escape our comfort zones. If 2017 has reminded us of anything, it's that the most obvious games are often the most likely to let you down. Just as, out in the real world, the politically motivated are turning to activism, so must educated players feel an obligation to help the less invested to unearth the gems in an ever-growing mound of dirt. To advance the cause of games which, in their quiet, playful ways, are pushing back against the tide,

WORLD BUILDING

While the bulk of the developers we speak to are preoccupied with the discovery problem, Takahashi, as you might expect, sees a very different stumbling block that lies between creators and the world being saved. He recalls a GDC panel he once sat on where he didn't go over so well, when he came out and said it: no, indie games can't change the world. "I don't think they understood," he recalls. "If you really love videogames, you should try to make the environment better for playing them." This isn't a *Katamari*-style environmental message, however: it's a simple matter of logistics, of people whose problems can't be solved by a TV or computer screen, and need real help. "If you have a friend who is sick, or has financial issues, help them! Then you can play videogames," he says. "If they don't have a house or a roof, please make one. If they don't have electricity, help them get it. Then play videogames together."





ignoring trends, taking on an increasingly cynical industry and an ever-more-miserable world and trying to make them both a little better. That last point, Boyer feels, is the true independent spirit.

"It's not necessarily about, like, here's 30 games about emotions, or a platformer about how my girlfriend broke up with me. It's not like that. It's something that feels life affirming, that makes you feel better for having done it, rather than worse.

"There's an essential humanity to it. With *Katamari*, for as much as it was about *everything*, it was also about what it means to be a human on Earth. It's this overwhelming catalogue of all the things that are on Earth, and what humans do with those things. I think you can also say that about *Below*, which is also a really personal journey, even though it's a dungeon crawler: it says a lot about what you try and do with the time that you have. *Fez* was very much an expression of Phil Fish, but also said something about exploration, and beauty. And it was something only Phil was ever going to make. No one else was going to make it. I think that is still the best representation of indie for me: that feeling that this could have come from absolutely no one else but this person."





Which brings us, rather neatly, back to Takahashi. The man who helped kickstart the indie spirit before we even knew what it was is back – at a time when the indie scene and the industry at large need him and his ilk. Naturally, he plays it down. "Honestly, I'm still not sure what 'indie games' are, or what 'triple-A games' are. For me, the more important thing is if it's fun or not, if it's great or not. Even if it's indie, if it's not fun, then it's not good, right?" *Wattam*'s fun. *Wattam*'s good. And *Wattam* feels like it could only have come from him. It won't save the world, of course. But it might make us feel a little better afterwards. With all that's going on out there, we'll gladly take that. ■





SAN! NI! ICHI!
I ♥
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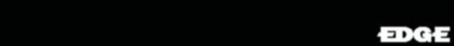

HAJIME!!!
日本マラソン
marathon
THE MULTIPLAYER MADNESS
BEGINS IN 2018!



F O R Z A



Milestone reported a 300 per cent growth in profits over 2017. These results bode well for the Italian game industry, whose fortunes have always been linked to those of its largest





Offroad four-wheel racing is an underserved part of the motorsport genre, and one that Milestone is keen to expand into. It now runs multiple teams in tandem

HORIZON

How games are taking a central role in shaping Italy's cultural and technological future – and vice versa

By Chris Thursten

Half the population of Italy plays videogames: men and women, young and old. Games are a billion-Euro industry for Europe's fourth-largest economy, and yet the Italian game industry employs only around 1,000 people. Economic, cultural and political factors have conspired to slow Italy's growth as a creator, rather than consumer, of interactive entertainment – but that is changing, and in the process creates an opportunity to take a snapshot of a new development landscape at the moment of its emergence.

Italy's game industry is a little over 20 years old. Its first (and still largest) studio of any scale was Milestone, the developer of racing games such as the *MotoGP* series and next year's *Gravel*. In the company's earliest days (under its previous name, Graffiti) there was no native talent pool to recruit from. "In Italy we started from zero," says Milestone vice president **Luisa Bixio**, "and that has encouraged us to create a good organisation. The challenging part is that there isn't a big videogame culture in Italy. It's difficult to recruit people – normally we recruit very young people and we train these people inside the company."

Milestone's head of game design, **Irvin Zonca**, concurs. "What Milestone started to do from the very beginning, 20 years ago, was to work as a [sort of] university for game developers in Italy. If we go back to the very beginning, 1996, there was no industry in Italy. There weren't game developers. There were very, very small teams, but the first big company in Italy was Milestone. There were no university courses; Milestone had to teach everything to the talent."

It's common for new game-development scenes to grow up around an initial handful of larger studios. In Italy, Milestone played that role solo, followed a few years later by Ubisoft Milan, which was founded in 1998 by talent-seeking executives from the multinational publisher's Paris headquarters. "At that time there was not an environment with schools, universities and so on," Ubisoft Milan managing director **Dario Migliavacca** says. "They really had to work to find the talent."

"Today you get a new guy and you expect the guy to be already prepared," says **Davide Soliani**, the studio's creative director and lead on *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle*, Ubisoft Milan's breakout ▶





Milestone's vice president Luisa Bixio and head of design Irvin Zonca





Ubisoft Milan's Dario Migliavacca (top) and *Kingdom Battle* creative director Davide Soliani

hit. "Twenty years ago it was more difficult, because you had to find somebody that you believed was truly talented, and then spend time on them to make them really grow. It was a little bit of school and work at the same time."

The presence of both Milestone and Ubisoft in Milan is not an accident: the northern city is both the centre of Italy's storied design and fashion business, and its industrial heartland. Nor is it an accident that Milan Games Week, organised by trade body AESVI, follows closely on the heels of Milan Fashion Week. There is a desire, on the part of AESVI and the Italian game industry more broadly, to grow in a way that harmonises with Italy's better-established cultural industries.

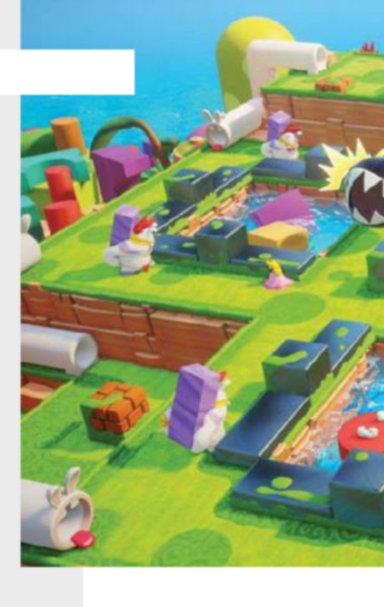
In the early days of Italian game development, precedent was key in shaping the types of studios that emerged – particularly Milestone, whose focus on racing sims reflects a national passion for cars, bikes, and motorsport. Similarly, the presence of renowned art and design colleges in the region created a talent pool that was attractive to Ubisoft, with art being one of the easiest roles to fill early in Ubisoft Milan's history.

Game development has been slow to grow in Italy, however, due to a social stigma derived from the sense that games come from outside of traditional culture. "Videogames have been seen in Italy as something evil," says Milan's council member for culture **Filippo Del Corno**. "As a distraction for young people from the most important things of life – studying, sport and so on. We're trying to help the reputation of games, because we trust that there's nothing evil in playing games. It's another form of play, but of course now technology allows us to play differently, to use our technology in a different way."

Beginning to unpick this prejudice means finding a role for games in Italy's broader culture. In Milan, games based on literature have been introduced to libraries as a way to encourage young people to read more than they do. "I think it's important to create a connection between games and the inspiration of the games themselves," Del Corno says. "To create a merging of experiences."

The initiative received a backlash from cultural conservatives, who fear that games will draw young people to libraries for the wrong reason. Italy's heritage in terms of art, architecture, literature and film speaks for itself, and many attitudes – and therefore many businesses – tend to look back on the past as the source of the country's greatest works. Del Corno, for his part, speaks to press about the Italian game industry ahead of opening a new Caravaggio exhibit at Milan's Palazzo Reale, as Milan Fashion Week wraps up and Milan Games Week begins.

Yet that exhibit has been enhanced with technology, through displays that help viewers appreciate the artistry of each painting's composition and creation. Del Corno believes that Italy, and Milan more specifically, has an opportunity to realign artistry and technology in Italian culture. "We can start, especially from our city, to go against this prejudice," he says. "One of the important things happening in our city now is the great relationship we are fostering between creativity and

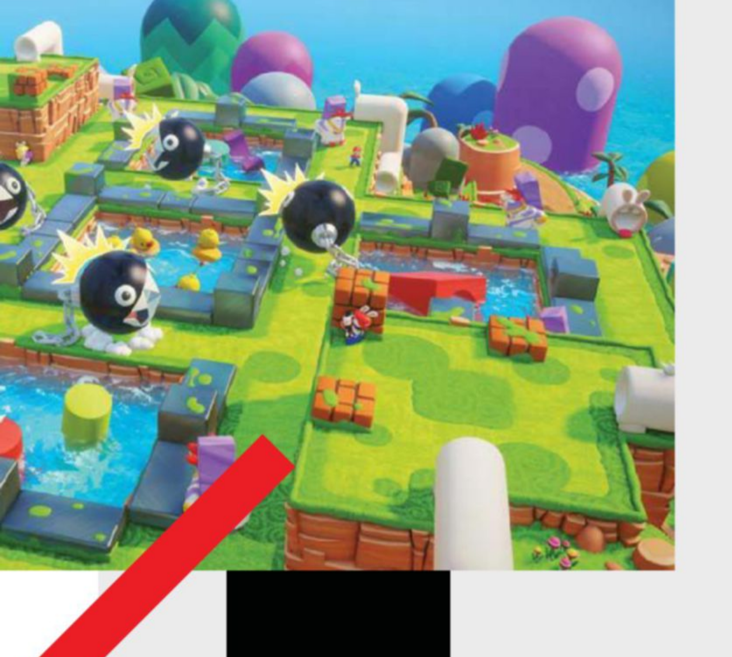


Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle has helped Ubisoft Milan to establish its own identity within the broader Ubisoft ecosystem

"VIDEOGAMES HAVE BEEN SEEN IN ITALY AS SOMETHING EVIL, AS A DISTRACTION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE"



The years spent developing party and mobile games have given way to a new burst of creativity at Ubisoft Milan. Work on the future of *Mario + Rabbids* continues



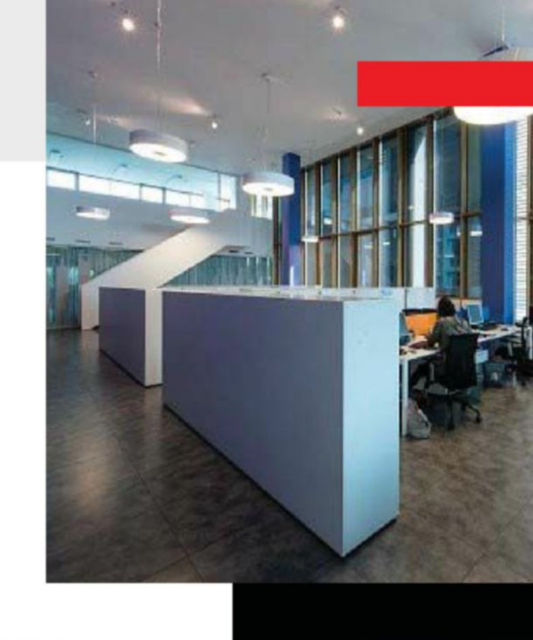
technology. We have very strong fields of creativity – fashion and design are very important. But technology is also important. I feel that the game industry merges creativity and technology, and it's very important not only from an economic point of view, but also from a cultural one.

"You can show how creativity and technology have always been related in history," Del Corno continues. "Important things happen in our country thanks to this kind of relationship. I talk a lot about Leonardo Da Vinci; when he arrived in Milan he was full of creativity, but he had no technology. In Milan, he found a place where the technology of the time could be used for him to explore his creativity. And I think this is key: to create a relationship between creativity and technology."

This new understanding of the role games might play in Italy's future cultural output has resulted in the introduction of tax subsidies similar to those that the Italian government already offers filmmakers. ▶

BATTLE WORK STATIONS

Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle **was primarily developed at Ubisoft Milan, with help from other Ubisoft studios when the project received the green light from Nintendo. That process took time, and involved a core team of five regularly consulting with Nintendo on their plans for the game. "We didn't get real approval at the very beginning," says Davide Soliani. "Nintendo said what they liked or didn't like, but didn't close the deal straight away – [they] said 'okay, show me more'." Even after both companies were happy with the game, Soliani was uncertain about how the public would respond. "Everything changed after E3," he says. "The stage, the video of the game, people queuing up for six hours... for me, it was crazy."**



Since 2014, games have also had an increased presence at Milan's biggest universities, including courses at the University Of Milan and the city's polytechnic. For Italy's oldest studios, these measures have been a long time coming. "We never got any support from the government," Milestone's Bixio says. "Whereas in the UK, France and so on you have lots of different kinds of support. On the other side, I think that's helped us become more efficient."

The modern Italian game industry provides a perspective on how games occupy a space between private and public business, traditional culture and emerging creative forms. Although games' multidisciplinary value is being seized upon by government officials now, it is often the case that these ideas, and the practices they support, came from ad-hoc private enterprises: many senior Italian developers in Milan have worked for either Ubisoft, Milestone, or both ("It's difficult when other studios take your people!" Bixio notes).

Publishers also play a role. Digital Bros was founded in 1989 as a distributor of internationally developed games within

Digital Bros is headquartered in Milan's fashionable Zona Tortona, surrounded by design agencies in a modern campus environment

Italy, and launched the 505 Games label in 2006. The company is headquartered in Milan, but publishes games produced around the world, with a back catalogue including *Payday 2*, *Terraria*, *Rocket League* and *Abzû*. Even so, Digital Bros is investing in the local industry. Alongside the growth in university-level game-development training, the Digital Bros Game Academy offers a one-year programme intended to prepare students for the realities of game production.

"We did not have the support that happened in other countries," Digital Bros CEO **Raffi Galante** says. "Support is crucial. Talent is a job at the end of the day; yes, they have a passion for play, but after a while they want to jump from being just entertainment to being a business. In Italy there is a big jump between academic studies and when you go to find a job. It's another world. In our case, now, we try to have a strong link between the academic side and the professional side."

Digital Bros Game Academy tutors students in the practical creation of games, introducing them to the roles and processes common to most games studios. Demand for graduates is high, and sufficiently high-quality student projects have a chance to be picked up by 505 or other publishers for full production. The intent is to create a healthier local ecosystem. "One of our goals is to keep Italian talent in Italy," Academy director **Geoffrey Davis** tells us. "The gaming industry is not nationalistic; there are big games internationally that are made by Italians, and Italian talent is prized. We're not against them going out of Italy, but we try to also use our in-house studios to place people. What most students say, if you talk to them, is that they'd like to have an experience outside of Italy but then come back and do their own thing here."

A growing industry means it is becoming increasingly viable for Italian developers working overseas to return home and work on the kinds of projects they really want to make. Ubisoft Milan's Soliani – whose tearful response to the announcement of *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle* was a rare moment of genuine sentiment at this year's E3 – spent years in London working for Kuju on GameCube's *Advance Wars* spin-off *Battalion Wars*. The same passion that drew Soliani overseas to work on a strategy game for Nintendo would emerge again more than a decade later in *Mario + Rabbids*, a game that has been a huge success story for Ubisoft Milan and the Italian development scene more broadly. The product of a five-person brainstorming team tasked with "surprising Nintendo", the success of the game has drawn the attention of other Italian developers thinking of returning home.

"We saw a big increase in the number of applications from everywhere," Ubisoft Milan's Migliavacca says of *Kingdom Battle*'s impact. "Of course from [within] Italy, but we also had a lot of Italians now working abroad in the industry who were impressed by the game, and are now wondering if it's time to come back."

The opportunity to work on a *Mario* game is rare, certainly – and rarely traditional, in the sense that these companies and their products exist wholly within the videogame industry. The Italian development scene, however, is developing an interdisciplinary posture. "We teach how to develop videogames, but actually we talk about digital entertainment," Davis says. "Digital entertainment is not just about videogames; it's about gamification, it's about serious games, it's about applying game mechanics to everyday life."

Although the majority of DBGA graduates go on to work in the game industry, many have found employment in fields like engineering and graphics design. Virtual reality in particular is of growing interest to Italian business-to-business digital services network Reply, who founded their first commercial game-development subsidiary, Forge Reply, in order to explore the relationship between games, business, and VR.



Digital Bros founders Rami Galante (left) and Raffi Galante



Abzû **was published by Digital Bros' publishing imprint, 505 Games. There is also a desire to publish more Italian-developed work alongside their international counterparts**

"WE NEVER GOT ANY HELP FROM THE GOVERNMENT. I THINK THAT'S HELPED US BECOME MORE EFFICIENT"

> **"THE CONCEPT FOR US WAS, 'LET'S BUILD A SKYWALKER RANCH WHERE WE CAN REALLY BE CREATIVE'"**





Forge Reply producer Samuele Perseo (top) and partner Paolo Capitelli

WHEN IN ROME

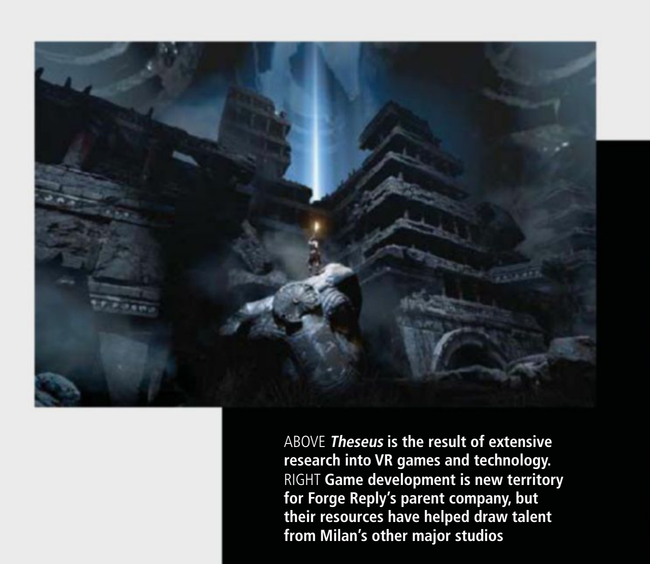
Forge Reply's *Theseus* is a PSVR adaptation of the Greek myth, with the player controlling Theseus from the third person. A *Resident Evil*-style fixed camera turns out to be a surprisingly good fit for virtual reality, giving the impression of being a voyeur looking in on an adventure without the motion sickness that can result from movement, combat or sudden perspective shifts. Forge Reply's parent company, Reply, had made an investment in virtual reality for B2B purposes before the current wave of commercial headsets were a reality, and applied those experiences to the game. In return, Forge Reply's developers assist with the company's more traditional projects – several of *Theseus*' environment artists recently worked on VR software for an Italian tiling company.

"In the B2B field there are opportunities to tinker with lots of strange new tech," says producer **Samuele Perseo**, who, like creative director Fabio Pagetti, worked for Ubisoft before leaving to join Forge Reply. The studio's consumer-facing team has recently released the thirdperson adventure game *Theseus* for PSVR, while its business-to-business side adapts videogame development experience to corporate products, such as VR training software. "One of the reasons Reply decided to invest in a videogame studio was because game language is important for our usual customers to know how to speak to *their* customers," says studio partner **Paolo Capitelli**. "VR is another tool for telling stories. It's another technology, perfect for communicating and engaging."

The benefit of the relatively slow growth of Italy's development scene is that the form it is adopting is decidedly modern. The diverse shapes of this growing generation of new studios – and the diverse ways in which they cross the lines between industries – is not specific to Italy, and may well be the shape of things to come.

Indie studio Ovosonico provides another example. Founded in 2012 by Ubisoft and Grasshopper Manufacture veteran **Massimo Guarini**, the studio's base is a villa in Varese, 55km north of Milan. "It took us seven months to get the right building," Guarini says. "This makes sense for us. For the same cost as a smaller normal office in Milan, I can have this, with the garden and everything else. The concept for us was, 'Let's try to build a campus. Let's build a super-small Skywalker Ranch where we can really be creative.'"

The film industry is a useful point of reference for Ovosonico. The studio invites guest artists and musicians to live at the villa and help shape games, actively seeking creative voices from outside the industry. It is important to Guarini that the studio maintains its creative diversity. "One of the big mistakes is to approach this business as an IT





ABOVE ***Theseus*** **is the result of extensive research into VR games and technology.**
RIGHT **Game development is new territory for Forge Reply's parent company, but their resources have helped draw talent from Milan's other major studios**





ABOVE **Ovosonico's *Last Day Of June* clearly demonstrates the benefits of drawing in external art and music talent.** RIGHT **The appeal of working at Ovosonico's Varese villa is obvious. Locations like this are a reason to look beyond Milan**

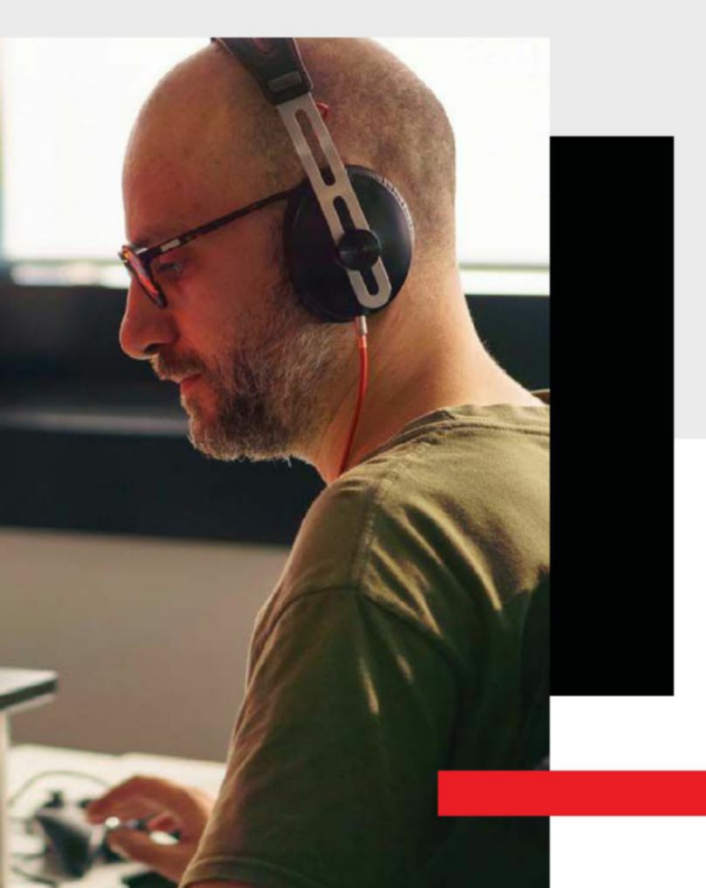




company," he says. "We're probably much closer to the movie industry here than making 'software'. You need to be able to surround yourself with different personalities."

Guarini is outspoken in his rejection of what he sees as the sameyness and inaccessibility of the traditional game industry, and although Ovosonico's core team is made up of veterans of Milan's larger studios, there's a strong emphasis on building a collective identity that stands in opposition to game-industry norms. "Our values are trying to expand the medium, to challenge some of the conservative ideas that are caging us, actually, in a toxic environment," Guarini says. The villa in Varese is its own statement: not of Italianness, but of a rejection of bullpen development farms and industrial thinking. "We weren't really targeting an 18th century villa," he says. "It just sort of happened. But I think it reflects our identity."

Guarini expresses concern for developers who don't give thought to identity, who "just like to make games" and don't consider what ideas those games, or the way that they're made, communicate. Yet there's a lesson for the industry as a whole to be gleaned from the way in which Italy's development scene is growing increasingly experimental in every regard – from pure business to pure art – despite the constraints under which it has operated under for the better part of 20 years. Bringing about change is a matter of supporting the right ideas, and those ideas can emerge from anywhere. Indeed, they're most likely to emerge in places like Italy where opportunities have traditionally been scant, where creative potential has not been fully tapped, and where the codified practices of industry have not yet fully set in. ■



BUSINESS AND PLEASURE

Ovosonico's Massimo Guarini believes that working with a publisher can be a valuable experience for indie developers. "To me, the publisher represents a test," he says. "It's easy for a creator to get lost in your own idea, to forget about the market or how other people may think about it... it's really important to have constant reality checks with people who aren't emotionally invested." Ovosonico sold its first IP, *Murasaki Baby*, to Sony in order to establish itself without becoming trapped in a cycle of work for hire. "The temptation is to start with a small work-for-hire thing for another studio," Guarini says. "Then you start paying the bills with that and that drives into an endless loop where you don't have the time or resources any more to invest in your own project. I think self-funding in indie is very dangerous, and a bad way to begin."



Massimo Guarini, founder of Ovosonico


THE
EDGE
AWARDS

File this one under the all-time greats. The year 2017 was a stone-cold classic, one that will come to be recalled with similar wistfulness to the likes of 1998 and 2004. It's a rare year that yields two **Edge** 10s – and never before have both gone to the same publisher. Yet 2017 was in top gear even before Switch came along. It began with a bang, and just kept going.

It's not just about quality, either, but where it came from, and what it represents. The year's opening salvo proved that Japan is now comfortably back to its best, and the industry is all the better for it. Indies have continued to surprise and delight, and virtual reality is settling into a marvellous groove. New IP has flourished.

Nothing ever lasts, of course, and the final few months of 2017 have left a sour taste. It's never nice to see business considerations intrude upon design decisions, but that concept was taken to extremes in the latter part of the year. That's borne out in the pages that follow, where there's a distinct lack of traditional big hitters.

Well, except for two. *Super Mario Odyssey* and *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* were beacons of light in a year that, when we weren't holding a controller, once again gave us little to feel positive about. They also lit up a meeting room at the **Edge** offices one December afternoon, when we tried to agree on a winner. Now the dust has settled, and the wounds have just about healed, join us as we celebrate the good, the bad and the *Battlefront* of another remarkable year in videogames.

PLAYSTATION GAME OF THE YEAR







RUNNER-UP

POLYBIUS

Developer/publisher Llamasoft
Format PS4, PSVR

Polybius is a classic Minter joint, all eye-popping colours and mooing ungulates, teasing you into daredevil moves as your score builds and the game's pace reaches a breathless clip. At times it feels like you're a ball bearing rolling around inside a kaleidoscope – and yes, in case you were wondering, that's absolutely a compliment.

RUNNER-UP

HORIZON ZERO DAWN

Developer Guerrilla Games **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4

Its open world, overflowing with distractions, pickups and a (necessarily, admittedly) intrusive UI, meant that *Horizon* lost a little lustre as soon as *Breath Of The Wild* showed up. Yet it instantly gave PlayStation a new mascot, and finally proved that Guerrilla has more strings to its electrified bow than mere technical prowess.

WINNER

NIOH

Developer Team Ninja **Publisher** SIE
Format PS4

Team Ninja's stock wasn't exactly high after one mis-step too many, and so the notion of the developer turning out a *Souls* homage didn't exactly quicken the pulse. Yet what emerged was remarkable, a fast, fluid, staggeringly deep and appropriately nails-hard action game for which FromSoft's dungeon-crawling template proved an ideal fit.

XBOX GAME OF THE YEAR







RUNNER-UP

NINJA GAIDEN BLACK

Developer Team Ninja **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format Xbox

Yes, this was a bad year for exclusive Xbox software. Yet Microsoft's continuing focus on backwards compatibility helps paper over the cracks, and a 16x resolution boost brought Tomonobu Itagaki's 12-year-old action classic into the modern era in rollicking style. That said, we'd prefer to not have to do this again next year, Microsoft.

RUNNER-UP

FORZA MOTORSPORT 7

Developer Turn 10 Studios **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Format Xbox One

The unannounced fiddle to the VIP system short-changed series fans – though Microsoft walked it back quickly enough – and there's admittedly little room for creative risk in a game about racing cars around tracks. But sim racing doesn't get much better, and Turn 10 gave Microsoft what it needed: a true 4K and HDR showcase for Xbox One X.

WINNER

CUPHEAD

Developer Studio MDHR **Publisher** Microsoft
Format Xbox One

Pushed to bizarre, beautiful limits and set to thumping ragtime, *Cuphead*'s animation makes for a wonderful setting to bounce through – and the promise of seeing more is a fine incentive to best its dastardly boss fights. Still, an indie boss rush winning here is indicative of Xbox's software struggles; this was the leader of a small pack.

NINTENDO GAME OF THE YEAR

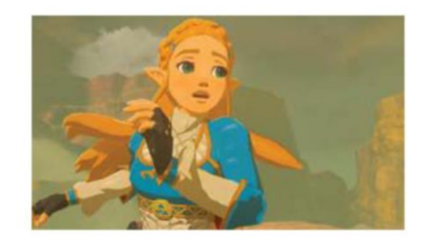


RUNNER-UP

ARMS

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch

An unfortunate smothering by *Splatoon 2* was a rare scheduling error from Nintendo, and means many have abandoned this wonderful twist on the fighting-game formula. *Arms* is Nintendo at its best, making an intimidating genre fun and accessible and in doing so teaching its fundamentals with an elegance Capcom could only dream of.



RUNNER-UP

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch

The least traditional of all Link's outings, *Breath Of The Wild* reduces the series' traditional gear-gated structure to a tutorial in the Great Plateau before inviting you into unexplored territory to begin the real adventure. The result is a feast far bigger, and better, than we ever dared expect, and is all the more remarkable for it.



WINNER

SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch

Well, it's certainly the most Nintendo game of 2017. Where *Breath Of The Wild* turned its gaze to horizons far beyond Kyoto, *Odyssey* set off for pastures new but couldn't resist looking back. From New Donk City's spellbinding festival to that post-game surprise, it's an exuberant celebration of Mario – and by extension, of Nintendo itself.

PC GAME OF THE YEAR

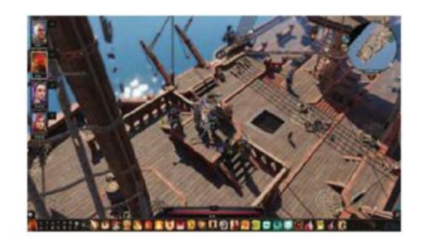


RUNNER-UP

FINAL FANTASY XIV: STORMBLOOD

Developer/publisher Square Enix **Format** PC

Naoki Yoshida's turnaround job on what was once Square Enix's greatest failure has been remarkable, and with the Stormblood expansion *FFXIV* improved further still. With a new 60-hour campaign, a streamlined combat system and myriad quality-of-life improvements, a game that once looked DOA is instead going from strength to strength.



RUNNER-UP

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

Developer/publisher Larian Studios **Format** PC

Matching humour with depth and reactivity, *Original Sin II* is one of the best traditional PC RPGs ever made. Larian's commitment to respecting player agency results in unparalleled freedom to alter – and even break – the narrative you're presented with. Underpinned by fantastic combat, this is a tremendous success.



WINNER

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

Developer PUBG Corp **Publisher** Bluehole Studio **Format** PC

Despite mad physics bugs, strange animations, and that one guy who thinks it's fun to hide in a shed for the entire game, Brendan 'Playerunknown' Greene's tense shootout reigned supreme this year, both on PC and in the wider zeitgeist. Expect its success to dictate the shape of multiplayer titles for a good while yet.

VR GAME OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

STAR TREK: BRIDGE CREW VR

Developer Red Storm Entertainment **Publisher** Ubisoft
Format PSVR, Rift, Vive

Like the original series, the fiction compensates for the wonky set dressing. Whether you're pushing buttons to shift power to phasers or grabbing a lever to warp clear of a Klingon ambush, the natural camaraderie that ensues makes for one of the friendliest online communities around.

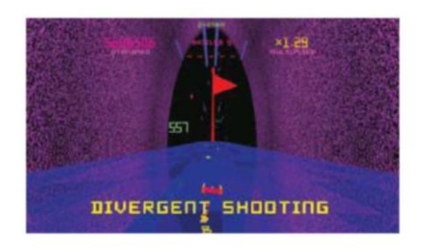


RUNNER-UP

STATIK

Developer/publisher Tarsier Studios
Format PSVR

This game simply couldn't exist outside virtual reality – or PSVR, since Sony's device is the only one on the market that can track a dual-stick controller. Trapping your hands inside puzzle boxes, and giving no information on how you might find the solution, you're left to experiment until a series of Eureka moments leads you to the finish line. Majestic.



WINNER

POLYBIUS

Developer/publisher Llamasoft
Format PS4, PSVR

An impeccably smooth 120fps framerate ensures this coruscating psychedelic VR rollercoaster won't force you to revisit your lunch, even as the swirling, hyper-coloured backdrops whizz by at impossible speeds. Minter's game plays well without a headset, but Sony should be grateful to him for a persuasive reason to keep hold of PSVR.

BEST VISUAL DESIGN

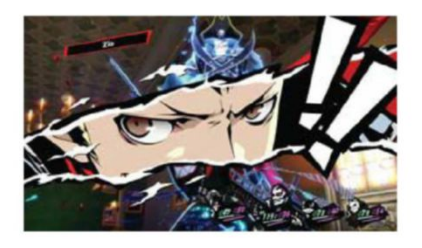


RUNNER-UP

ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

After two games set in tight urban spaces, *Origins*' switch to ancient Egypt was the breath of fresh air this series needed. The game itself may prove there's work still to be done on the fundamentals, but this is a work of visual splendour from a publisher far from renowned for its technical prowess.



RUNNER-UP

PERSONA 5

Developer Atlus **Publisher** Atlus/Deep Silver
Format PlayStation

Those character models aren't exactly easy on the eye – but when you've got the best user interface in the business to distract you, it hardly matters. The dynamic flourishes of *Persona 5*'s menus encourage almost performative button presses to Shoji Meguro's disco jazz, raising the pulse of the bombastically animated battles.



WINNER

ARMS

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch

From the pec-jiggling Max Brass to Min-Min's spiralling noodle arms, these are hugely distinctive fighting-game character designs: large, bold and beautifully animated. It's a minor miracle that such busy action remains readable. Scalable, too – you'll struggle to find a Switch game that looks this good on the small screen.

BEST AUDIO DESIGN







RUNNER-UP

SPLATOON 2

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch

Plopping into puddles of ink, or noodling about with lobby sound effects, is delightful – but *Splatoon 2*'s audio design becomes a tactical boon in battle. Ink hits enemies with a satisfying rat-a-tat, and the sirens of a Bomb Launcher are instantly distinguishable from the sound of incoming Tenta Missiles, helping you duck for appropriate cover.

RUNNER-UP

NIER: AUTOMATA

Developer PlatinumGames **Publisher** Square Enix
Format PC, PS4

Automata deserves a spot here for the 'become as gods' sequence alone, but the score from composers Keiichi Okabe and Keigo Hoashi elevates the action throughout. Pounding mechanical percussion amplifies the physical conflict, while the sumptuous choral themes provide a melancholic underpinning for the tale's emotional peaks.

WINNER

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch

Some bemoaned the absence of a traditional *Zelda* soundtrack from much of *BOTW*, but would you really want a swelling orchestral score at your back for 200 hours? In any case, that just gave a masterful SFX palette more room to breathe, from the soft whistle of the wind to the gentle clank of the items in Link's backpack.

BEST STORYTELLING







RUNNER-UP

NIER: AUTOMATA

Developer PlatinumGames **Publisher** Square Enix
Format PC, PS4

Yes, the first playthrough ends flatly, but there's a long way to go. A second route offers a fresh perspective; the third, another – and by then few players will fail to see *Automata* through to its bittersweet conclusion. Yet for all the meta trickery, it's director Yoko Taro's fearless probing into humanity's dark side that resonates most.

RUNNER-UP

PYRE

Developer/publisher Supergiant Games
Format PC, PS4

Pyre's liberation rites highlight the strength of its writing: choosing which of your fellow exiles to set free prompts agonised deliberation. You'll care enough that you might even opt to throw the game to let an opponent return to the world above. And an end-credits song whose lyrics adapt to your choices makes for a delightful final flourish.

WINNER

WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

Developer Giant Sparrow **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

You'd expect a walking simulator to deliver in story terms: traditionally, it's all this genre has. Yet Giant Sparrow's greatest trick is to make narrative a gameplay mechanic, using on-screen text to subtly guide you through this bizarre, corkscrewing house. In doing so it elevated its genre to a higher plane.

HARDWARE OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

SNES CLASSIC MINI

Manufacturer Nintendo

Virtual Console may be MIA, but who cares when we have Actual Console instead? This pocket-sized marvel is only a functioning eject button (and, okay, some slightly longer controller leads) away from perfection. If you know how, a catalogue already groaning with classics can be handily expanded; if nothing else, it's the best *Yoshi's Island* machine in two decades.



RUNNER-UP

XBOX ONE X

Manufacturer Microsoft

This is not merely about the hardware itself, but what it represents. For the first time, we have seen a clear power deficit turned into an advantage part way through a generation. It completes Microsoft's journey to redemption after Xbox One's appalling launch. And it reflects a focus on backwards compatibility that is good news for players everywhere. Welcome back, Microsoft.



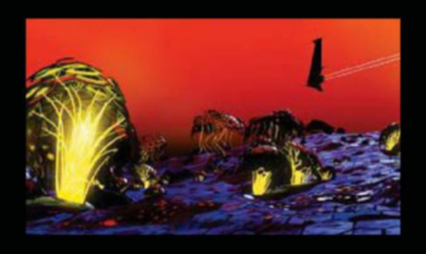
WINNER

SWITCH

Manufacturer Nintendo

At the Switch unveiling event in London in January, the mood was dour. The launch line-up was disappointing, the hardware felt overpriced, and many thought Nintendo had another Wii U on its hands. How wrong we all were. *Mario* and *Zelda* helped, of course, but Switch's real success is how well it fits into modern life; a wonderful TV console, and a perfect handheld too.

LIVING GAME OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

NO MAN'S SKY

Developer Hello Games **Publisher** SIE
Format PC, PS4

The launch version of *No Man's Sky* had a way to go before it even began to start living up to expectations. Ever determined, Hello Games spent this year tweaking it. Anniversary update Atlas Rises offered plenty of reasons to return to outer space, including new story missions, terraforming tools and – finally – multiplayer functionality.



RUNNER-UP

RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

Ubisoft's tense, tactical online shooter is two years old now, but the publisher continues to support it as if it's a brand-new release. In addition to a steady flow of new content and a thriving esports scene, *Siege* is notable for its developers' openness with regard to balance updates, treating players with respectful intelligence.



WINNER

OVERWATCH

Developer/publisher Blizzard Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

A host of regular free updates – maps, modes, ability tweaks and new characters – ensure *Overwatch*'s metagame has been constantly evolving ever since its 2016 release. Meanwhile, the widespread excitement (and subsequent theorycrafting) over each new hero is still capable of hijacking social media for days on end.

PUBLISHER OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

UBISOFT

For the first time in a while, Ubisoft managed to get through a year without controversy. In the process it assembled a line-up of games of remarkable breadth, particularly among publishers of its size. *For Honor*, *Star Trek: Bridge Crew*, *Assassin's Creed Origins* and the wonderful *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle* reflect a publisher that, for all its size, is still unafraid to experiment.



RUNNER-UP

ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE

If Devolver Digital brands itself as the indie sector's cool kid, Annapurna is its hipster, with a discerning, artistic, experimental line-up that delights at every turn. *Edith Finch* and *Gorogoa* were this year's standouts, but 2018 looks bright too; this film company hasn't been in games for long, but its logo is already a signal of estimable quality.



WINNER

NINTENDO

Well, obviously. Never before has a single publisher earned two **Edge** 10s in a calendar year, but Nintendo's 2017 was about even more than two of the best games ever made. *Arms*, *Splatoon 2* and *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* further proved that when Nintendo's on form, no one else comes close. We've no idea how it plans to follow that in 2018 – but we can't wait to find out.

STUDIO OF THE YEAR



RUNNER-UP

HOUSEMARQUE

The Finnish studio has publicly abandoned the genre on which it made its name. It went out with a bang, hooking up with coin-op legend Eugene Jarvis to make the astonishing *Nex Machina*. If you haven't already, get your wallet out – perhaps we can persuade the greatest arcade-game developer of modern times to change its mind, and have one more go at beating its high score.



RUNNER-UP

GIANT SPARROW

This small Santa Monica studio turned a few heads with its experimental, monochromatic 2012 debut *The Unfinished Swan*, but only a fool could ignore *What Remains Of Edith Finch*. A gracefully handled evolution of the humble walking simulator was the finest indie game of the year, and ensured that we'll be watching Giant Sparrow's future endeavours like – apologies in advance – a hawk.



WINNER

NINTENDO EPD

What we've seen of Nintendo's Kyoto HQ is pristine, brilliant white and minimally decorated; you'd be forgiven for thinking you were in the offices of a chic, slightly wanky design company. Yet behind closed doors, they make the best games in the world. This was an astonishing 2017 from a company that remains, creatively at least, the absolute best in the business.



DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

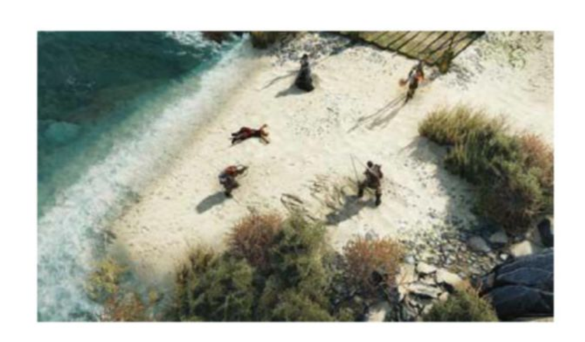
Developer/publisher Larian Studios **Format** PC

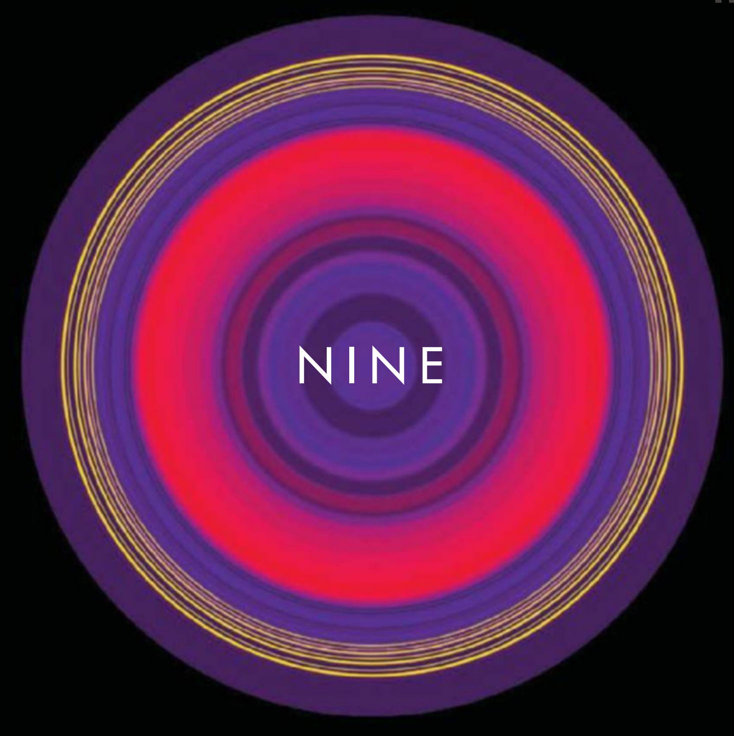
The *Divinity* series has emerged from relative obscurity to claim its place at the pinnacle of the traditional PC RPG renaissance. This previously underserved genre is now tremendously well-appointed, with *Torment*, *Pillars Of Eternity*, *Tyranny* and most recently *Original Sin II* all speaking to the continued relevance of these kinds of games.

In a competitive field, Larian's work stands out thanks to inventive design and a willingness to put power in players' hands. At its core, this is as much a simulation as an RPG: all of its systems, from elemental magic to personality, persuasion to trade to combat and questing, are linked and based on a shared set of fundamental principles. This is a game that avoids trammelling the player at all costs, instead confronting you with realistic outcomes for your decisions.

You can kill plot-critical NPCs, abandon your companions, and even decide that you'd rather primarily play *as* your companions and *Original Sin II* will adapt to these decisions – often with a sense of wit that reflects the tone of a pen-and-paper roleplaying session. This extends from its writing to the considerations of its combat. Most players will experience a moment when Divinity appears to second-guess them, such as when your frontline warrior, covered in blood from a previous kill, discovers to her peril that blood conducts electricity. These moments of surprising depth and dynamism are a reliable source of joy over the course of a long campaign.

Original Sin II's capacity to surprise stems from Larian's unwillingness to lean on the same tricks that typify the RPG genre; the railroading that determines which decisions can be made and when, which characters can meet their fates and how. It's an invitation to expect more from interactive storytelling than a screenplay packed with if-then statements.





POLYBIUS

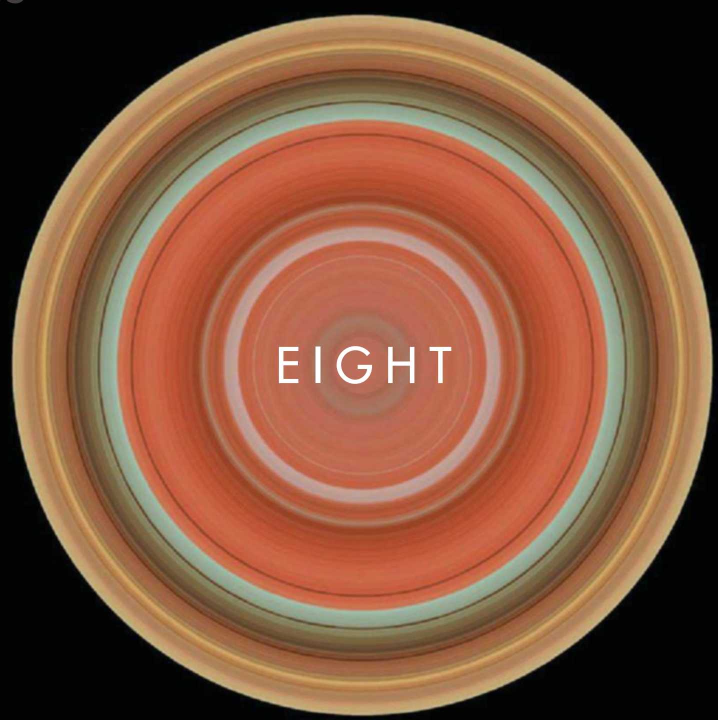
Developer/publisher Llamasoft **Format** PS4, PSVR

The urban myth goes that *Polybius* was a 1980s arcade game that doubled as a psychological experiment designed to provoke powerful psychotropic effects among its players. There could hardly be anyone better positioned to bring that particular legend to life than Jeff Minter, really. Minter's *Polybius* isn't dangerous, of course, though at times it feels like it – especially when you reach top speed and your eyes widen, trying to take in the rush of bright colours and strange patterns.

Up to a point, it's a game where you're free to control the pace. You're not forced to pass through the narrow gates spread across each of the 50 courses here, but you'll be tempted to do so anyway, your speed and score picking up as you do. But as you accelerate, negotiating those gaps proves a challenge in itself, let alone keeping your eye on the various enemies and hazards hurtling your way. Hit anything and you'll lose a bit of your shield, putting you one step closer to death; even worse, you'll lose your rhythm. This is a game about finding and maintaining flow, and using your instinct to guide you to the end.

It's a generous game, with each stage offering some fresh twist or other, whether you're grabbing air to leap barriers that span the width of the course, or slaloming between flagpoles that loom particularly large in VR. That's the way to experience it if you can, though the benefit of playing on a plain old flatscreen is that it's slightly less sensorially engulfing and your scores are likely to improve as a result. Either way, this is a spellbinding return. You can tell Minter had a ball making it; you'll almost certainly have an equally great time wrapped in its dazzling embrace.





YAKUZA 0

Developer/publisher Sega **Format** PS4

We've been singing the praises of the *Yakuza* series for quite a while now, so it was one of the year's more pleasant surprises to see others suddenly clutching the same hymn sheet. In fairness, the circumstances surrounding its launch were more favourable than usual: yes, it was still two years after its Japanese release, but on current-gen hardware at least. And with Sony talking up its imminent arrival, anticipation had spread some way beyond the limited reach of the remaining loyalists.

It did no harm that *Zero* was ideal for newcomers. As a prequel, it could afford to toss out several games' worth of baggage to focus on the origin story of regular protagonist Kazuma Kiryu and loose cannon Goro Majima. It benefitted, too, from Atlus's localisation expertise, while the series' surreal streak provided vignettes tailor-made for sharing across social media.

Beyond that, *Zero* won people over by simply being a really good *Yakuza* game. Kamurocho remains one of gaming's most evocative settings, and it has never looked better, offering an even broader selection of side activities than usual. Two protagonists make for a more focused story, trimming much of the fifth game's bloat. In truth, the likeably stoic Kiryu ends up playing second fiddle, with Majima stealing the show: his introduction in an extended cutscene where he humiliates a patron of his cabaret club is a classic, while his flamboyant fighting styles prove he can mix it up as well as his counterpart. Little wonder that remake *Yakuza Kiwami* expanded Majima's role, letting Kiryu pick up some valuable thug-bashing techniques from his eye-patched rival. A sixth numbered entry, due soon, promises further refinement; for now, this is as good as *Yakuza* has ever been.





NIOH

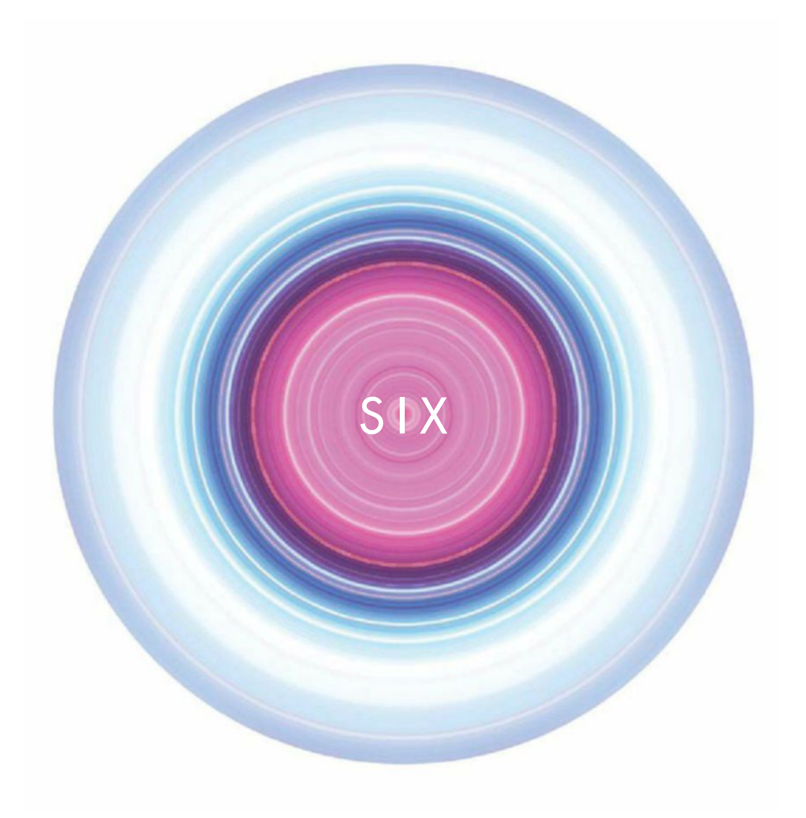
Developer Team Ninja **Publisher** SIE **Format** PC, PS4

At first, *Nioh* seems a little too in hock to its inspirations. The FromSoft formula courses through its veins; were it not for the fact that attacks have been remapped from the shoulders to the face buttons, you'd be forgiven for thinking you were playing a new *Souls* spin-off. It feels as if *Bloodborne* has been transported to the samurai era: corkscrewing areas with little shrines that save your progress on your way to fight some colossal demon at level's end. It has its own ideas, sure – chiefly the Ki Pulse, which rewards a properly timed press of R1 after a combo by automatically starting to refill your stamina bar. But the initial feeling is that someone at Koei Tecmo wrote '*Ninja Gaiden* X *Dark Souls*' on a whiteboard, and that was that.

It's not entirely untrue, but it turns out that the Ki Pulse is the gateway to a combat system of extreme nuance and flexibility. The same button is also used, in combination with D-pad presses, to change between three stances, each varying in moveset, speed and power. Combining the two first starts stamina regen, then hastens it, as well as cancelling the previous move's recovery frames so you can continue your combo. The result is a flowing, freeform battle system that FromSoft's games, for all their magic, simply cannot touch. Nor can most other games, to be fair.

Team Ninja also breaks from the *Souls* style guide with *Nioh*'s structure and setting. By having the game span feudal Japan in a series of discrete levels, it can craft a game of tremendous geographical and stylistic variety without the whole losing coherence. And it's simply vast, with dozens of missions on its critical path, even more waiting off the beaten track, and some of the best moments in the game added through post-release DLC. Suffice it to say that Team Ninja's glory days are no longer behind it.





NEX MACHINA

Developer/publisher Housemarque **Format** PC, PS4

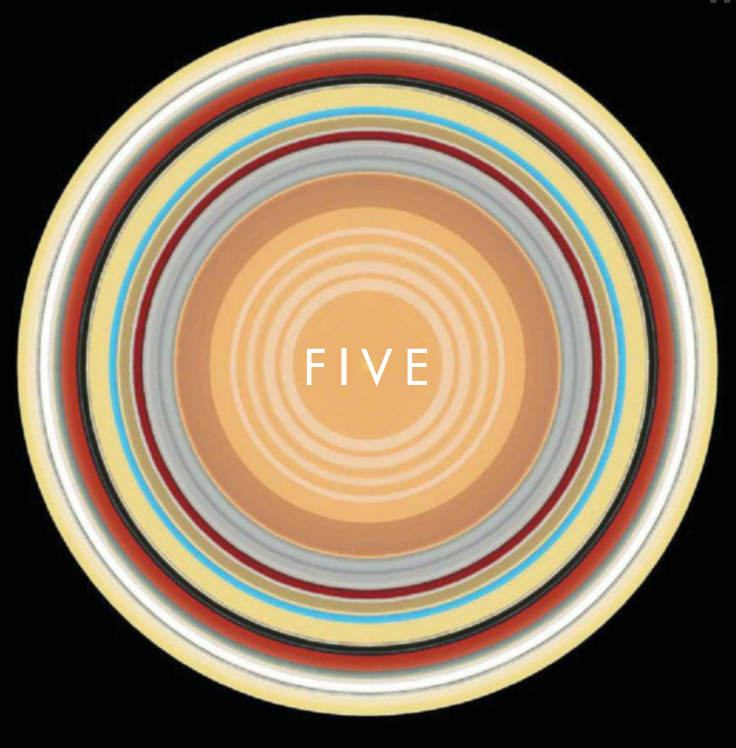
If we hadn't already known Eugene Jarvis had teamed up with Housemarque on *Nex Machina*, we'd have suspected some kind of foul play. This is every bit the game for which you'd hope from such a collaboration: an old-school, twin-stick shooter with contemporary sensibilities that feels like the natural successor to *Robotron* and *Smash TV* that Jarvis never quite got around to making.

Even on Rookie difficulty, the lowest setting recommended for a first play, the screen quickly becomes busier than Shibuya Crossing. Rather than condescendingly simplifying things for less capable players, Housemarque keeps the intensity at fever pitch, instead letting enemies fall sooner to your fire as a way of dialling back the challenge – if only by a touch. Over time, you begin to master the art of survival and your focus shifts to the leaderboards: rescuing the human survivors on each level is important, but it's less about the numbers than the timing, a combo gauge slowly emptying after each successful save and encouraging last-second dashes into the heart of the enemy swarms.

What a pity Housemarque didn't have the same keen sense of timing *Nex Machina* demanded from its players. It's a better game than the Finns' still-terrific *Resogun*, another Jarvis homage, but that had the benefit of launching alongside the PS4 without much by way of competition. In an outstanding year for new games, it sadly got lost in the scrum and hastened its maker's decision to abandon its favoured genre.

Yes, technically *Matterfall* came afterwards. But if Housemarque is really abandoning arcade games for good, then let *Nex Machina* be its swan song. It's a spectacular way to bow out, as the acme of the studio's considerable achievements to date.





ARMS

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch

A good fighting game is all about feel. And *Arms* is, in every possible sense, the feelgood brawler of the year – from its Day-Glo yellow livery and roster of madcap characters, to its springy limbs and joyful championing of motion controls. And that theme song. Upon booting up, the game bursts into a musical announcement of the excitement to come that's been locked in our cranial disc trays ever since.

Perhaps *Arms*' infectious spirit was insurance of a sort. If a riff on the genre didn't chime with players, the Technicolor trimmings would capture that feelgood factor. In truth, *Arms* hardly needs them. Just as Nintendo made bombing about in cars fun for everyone with *Mario Kart*, so, too, it found a way to make a fighting game feel like child's play. The basics are simple – left and right punch, block, jump, grab and dash – and moves easily readable, on account of everyone having, you know, massive extendable arms.

Yet *Arms*' most accessible elements are transformed in experienced hands. Its motion controls allow you to dictate the precise curvature of punches, while the silly designs of arm power-ups mask tactical nuance. A space-controlling Dragon on one hand might help you sneak in a hit with a fiery Slapamander on the other; the impenetrable weight of a Guardian suits defensive play until you spot your chance for a slow-mo KO.

A poorly timed release meant *Arms* sadly didn't make its way into nearly enough hands. But it's still left us reeling. In a year of run-of-the-mill brawlers, *Arms* has reinvigorated our expectations for the genre as the brightest, boldest and most technically accomplished fighting game we've seen in years.





PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

Developer PUBG Corp **Publisher** Bluehole Studios **Format** PC

The **Edge** Awards celebrate games that we consider to be the pinnacle of their craft. Typically they are polished to a sheen; works whose ambitions have been met with graceful aplomb, whose technical merits are beyond reproach. *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*, however, is a mess. Yet it is one of the biggest and best games of 2017.

Its success comes from its premise – and unlike most early access games, it delivered on the undeniable promise of it the minute it appeared on Steam. To recap: 100 players, working either solo or in groups of up to four, parachute onto a map that is eight kilometres square, and begin to hunt. At first it's a search for loot, and then for other players, since the goal is to be the last person, or group, standing. After a few minutes, the map contracts, a blue circle denoting the field of play shrinking towards the centre, killing anyone still outside it when a timer expires. As the number of players still standing gets lower, the map gets smaller still, pushing those remaining together. The final moments of a *PUBG* match are as sphincter-clenchingly tense as anything in gaming. It's here, hunkered desperately down in a shed or a bathroom, or peeking urgently out from behind an all-too-tiny tree, that the game works its magic.

The results of that alchemy are as watchable as it is playable – arguably more so, given the bugs. This was a game born on Twitch, that became the biggest PC game on the planet not through magazines, websites or marketing spend, but by simply existing, and making for such compulsive viewing. Once in a generation comes a game that seems to change everything. We've had a few of those this year, but none will prove so transformative to their genre as this brilliant, irresistible mess.





WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

Developer Giant Sparrow **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One

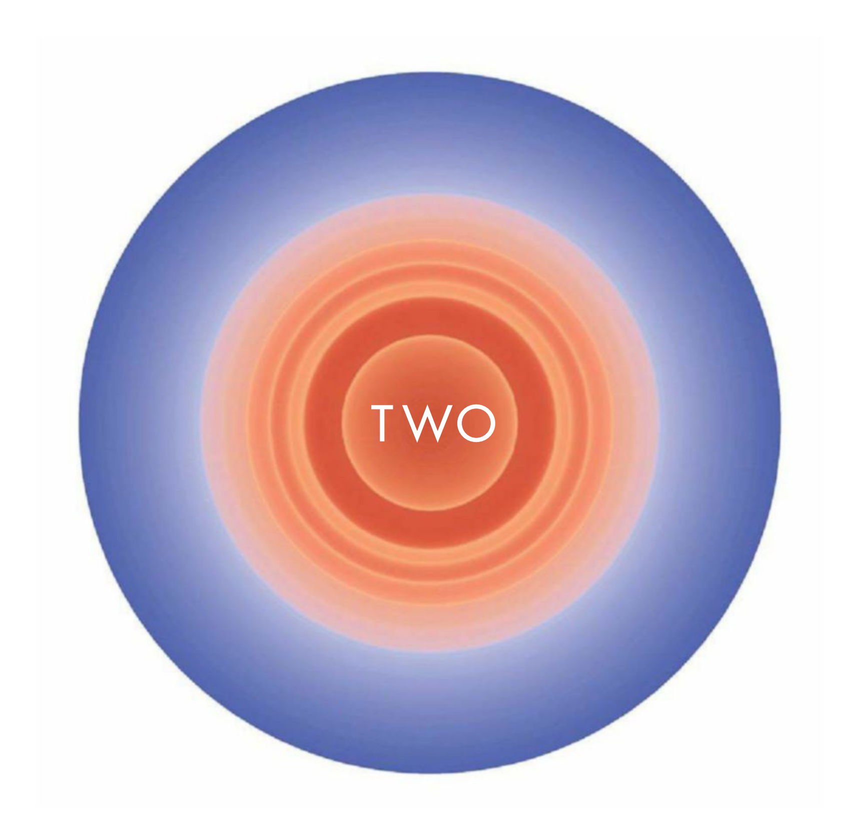
We try not to think about death. It's tempting to push the thought down, blot it out, board it up. Edith Finch, however, goes looking for it. Your journey together through the family home is careful but purposeful. Each bedroom contains, in some form, the story of each Finch's final moments. A ghoulish conceit, perhaps – but Giant Sparrow manages to make a walking tour of death feel like a victory lap.

At first, a plod around an eerie house isn't exactly groundbreaking. But the deeper you go into the Finch domicile, the more exceptional it proves. It's a warren-like hodgepodge of shacks and towers, propped up by tree branches and run through with hidden passages. Thankfully, you're guided by Edith's narration, which hangs handwritten in the air, pointing to the next room, the next story. Peepholes drilled into doors foreshadow neat little glimpses into the lives – and deaths – of each Finch.

Poking around lovingly detailed bedroom clutter acts as a warm-up for the playable death scenes, in which characters are memorialised in singularly personal fashion. Routinely fantastical, never mawkish and sometimes darkly funny, they set a new standard for the genre. Mechanics are deftly matched to narrative thrust: it is Lewis Finch's scene, the razor edge of this craftsmanship, that leaves perhaps the most indelible impression.

What Remains Of Edith Finch is a modern memento mori, not composed of skulls and crosses, but of swingsets, of stories, of canned peaches and plastic frogs. It celebrates, through the lens of death, the miracle of life: the existence, however brief, of something unique. Indeed, as you close the book on this short but remarkable tale, it's hard to feel sad. Everything must come to an end, Edith Finch says. How beautiful that it came to be at all.





SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch

If *Breath Of The Wild* was about Nintendo redefining *Zelda* for the future, *Odyssey* feels like the company closing the door on the past. Mario has always been a plaything, but this is the videogame equivalent of the teacher unlocking the toy cupboard on the last day of term, setting in motion a fast-paced, chaotic, dizzying display of free-thinking creativity. *BOTW* was open and elegant; *Odyssey*'s kingdoms may be large, but they are busy, and bonkers.

It's a weird game, and at times a weirdly uneven one – but that's the price you pay when you seek to reward players of all skill levels at just about every turn. *Odyssey*'s moons dole out the same reward for a lengthy platforming section as for a ground pound on a suspicious hillock. It means that even a relative beginner stands a decent chance of seeing this game's vertiginous high points: the New Donk City festival; that anime-as-you-like final escape; the lovingly nostalgic moment of fan service that follows it; and any number of little thrills that come in waves as you gambol about in a game that rewards gambolling like no other.

The journey to the end credits is wondrous, but the real magic is afterwards, when each kingdom unfurls in front of you. At some point you'll realise that what defines *Odyssey* isn't its capture mechanic, or its structure. It's in the most meaningful evolution of Mario's moveset since *Super Mario 64*, driven by the ability to leave Cappy spinning in mid-air and dive towards him, turning your fabric companion into a makeshift platform. Mario can reach higher, and soar further, than ever before. Setting foot in that post-credits kingdom, you spy a moped. The combustion engine is the standard way of getting around in game worlds of this size, but only a fool would hop on. You wind up a triple jump, fling out your cap, and the magic begins anew.





THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD) **Format** Switch, Wii U

Goodness, where to start? That is, come to think of it, the question most players will ask themselves as Link awakens and walks, blinking, into the largest and most dizzyingly open Hyrule to date. And that's just the Great Plateau. Soon afterward, *Breath Of The Wild* begins again, as you float down and the world gets so much bigger still. It's formidable, overwhelming – and utterly freeing. Nothing and nowhere is off limits.

For a series that has lately been reluctant to take the training wheels off, it's a startling change: a reversion, in fact, to the Famicom original, which similarly invited you to get hopelessly, gloriously lost. But everything else is a progression: this is a *Zelda* that's learned a few tricks from other open-world games, sure, but it's made them its own, constantly establishing new standards for the way things should be done. We were bored of climbing towers, we thought. Well, not here. Degradable weapons, a much-derided idea, lend combat a frantic, improvisational feel. Cookery is crafting made fun: playful, experimental, purposeful.

At times it's a pure survival game, at others a puzzler with myriad solutions, some of which probably haven't even been discovered yet. It's a playground and a chemistry set, where abilities can be combined in endlessly inventive ways. Developers have already taken to studying its design tricks, and you sense its impact will resonate long and loud. It's that same trailblazing spirit that spurs you on even in the moments you're made to feel exposed and vulnerable, knowing discoveries and rewards are guaranteed, regardless of your destination. For once, it's not indecision that prompts the question, but giddy anticipation. Where to start? How thrilling to wonder.



THE ALTERNATIVE EDGE AWARDS

BEST SPINOFF AUDITION

POKIO

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch

Also known as The Captain Toad Award, though Nintendo makes you wait longer for *Odyssey*'s show-stealing cameo. This pointy-billed bird is a versatile wonder, poking Spinies into Bowser Kingdom and launching firework bombs at breakable blocks. Best of all, he can dig his beak into walls like a piton before springing upward, making Nathan Drake look like an amateur.



SPIKIEST SPIKES

SNAKE PASS

Developer/publisher Sumo Digital
Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One

All that fuss about *Cuphead*, and we didn't come close to throwing a controller in anger. The office Switch, however, barely survived Sumo Digital's devious serpentine puzzle-platformer – specifically, a checkpoint-free gauntlet in Level 6, which takes the concept of difficulty spikes rather literally. Poor old Noodle ended up like a pincushion; our egos, likewise, were thoroughly pricked.



WORST MUSIC

WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

Developer MachineGames **Publisher** Bethesda
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

The fun of shooting Nazis perhaps contributed to some generous scores for MachineGames' uneven sequel, but it's a very entertaining shooter nonetheless. At least until the end credits, which deliver the most appalling cover since Ico's US box art, a death-metal version of Twisted Sister's best-known anthem. We're not gonna take it? Absolutely – thank heavens for the mute button.



WORST MISUSE OF FORCE

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

Developer Criterion, DICE, Motive **Publisher** EA
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

It was the year's most obvious banker: a greatly expanded sequel based on one of the most lucrative properties on the planet into which EA had poured tremendous resources. The reality? A game that was dead before it had even launched, which has prompted government investigations, and had EA investors crying out in terror. Somehow we doubt they'll be suddenly silenced.



BEST DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch

It's always been family friendly, but the Switch re-release of *Mario Kart 8* is the series' most accessible game to date. Automated acceleration and steering bring the game into reach of even the tiniest hands – leading one member of the **Edge** brood to loudly proclaim himself the best in the world. We taught the little blighter a red-shell lesson or six, don't you worry.



MOST CUNNING PLAN

DESTINY 2

Developer Bungie **Publisher** Activision
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

In 2014, reviewers blitzed through *Destiny*'s abysmal campaign and slapped poor scores on it accordingly, missing out on its best-in-class endgame. How do you fix that in the sequel? Pour all your resources into the first 20 hours of the game then watch the 9s and 10s roll in, as traffic-hungry websites post reviews before they realise the paper-thin nature of what followed. Evil genius.



MOST ELUSIVE NPC

ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

Origins' level gating rather forces you to tackle 'optional' side missions, but one provided an intriguing mystery. Sent to find a quest-giver in a cave, we were surprised to see a light-skinned placeholder character model in his stead. Suddenly, the objective marker shifted; our contact had teleported 200 yards away, where we had to talk to him through a wall. Bayek, indeed.



SNEAKIEST OPPORTUNISM

FORTNITE

Developer/publisher Epic Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One

If *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds* was the phenomenon of the year, it wasn't just creator Brendan Greene who profited from its success. Epic's co-op survival sim had been years in the making, but it only exploded after it hurriedly pivoted to adopt *PUBG*'s battle royale structure. Fittingly, it took two weeks for the standalone mode to hit the ten-million-player mark.



MOST INSENSITIVE LOOT

CALL OF DUTY: WWII

Developer Sledgehammer Games
Publisher Activision **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One

Having taken great pains to treat the Holocaust with appropriate respect, Sledgehammer Games shot itself in the foot with its new hub area. Here, Normandy's landing grounds witness another catastrophic assault, only this time the victims are taste and decency, as loot boxes descend from the sky bearing cards to unlock facepalm emotes and gaudy weapon grips. Classy.



FUZZIEST FEELINGS

MARIO + RABBIDS: KINGDOM BATTLE

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Milan, Paris)
Format Switch

E3 2017 was as loud and brash as ever, but amid the din of the industry's annual measuring contest came a real tug at the heartstrings. Ubisoft Milan creative director Davide Soliani wiped away the tears as Messrs Guillemot and Miyamoto unveiled *Kingdom Battle*. A rare E3 reminder that games, ultimately, are works of love and passion.



MOST CONFUSED FEELINGS

YAKUZA KIWAMI

Developer/publisher Sega
Format PS4

Sega's remaster of Kazuma Kiryu's debut added a new feature, Majima Everywhere, which sees long-running side-thorn Goro Majima pop up all over the shop, often when you least want him to. So it proved when we visited a hostess club to find our eyepatched friend in miniskirt and fishnets, flirting with us over champagne. It turns out pink looks worryingly good on him.



MUCKIEST MOTION CONTROLS

1-2-SWITCH

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch

Specifically, Milk mode, where players make masturbatory motions with the Joy-Cons to milk an imaginary cow. As a showcase of HD Rumble, it's wonderful, but it's not exactly clean family fun. At Switch's unveiling event, our demo handler's insistence that competitors maintained eye contact was even worse. We'll never be able to read Digital Spy again without cringing.



THE MAKING OF...



TACOMA

How Fullbright headed into space to build a home away from home

By Chris Schilling

Format PC, Xbox One
Developer/publisher Fullbright
Origin US
Release 2017

Having *Gone Home* with its celebrated 2013 debut, Fullbright could hardly have journeyed farther from home for its second game. It wasn't always thus: when development began, *Tacoma* referred to the city in Washington State, where the new game would be set. But in seeking to avoid second album syndrome, the studio knew another domestic scenario was staying too close to territory it had already covered. Before long, Fullbright had settled on a new setting. Tacoma became a recently-abandoned orbital space station, with the player character sent on a mission to retrieve AI data following a mysterious incident, and piecing together the story from archived augmented-reality recordings.

It was, Fullbright co-founder **Steve Gaynor** tells us, a matter of pursuing a fresh challenge. After all, people had connected so strongly with *Gone Home* partly because it was so different from anything they'd played before. "Part of it was, 'Our last game was set in the '90s, this one is going to be set in the future', so that we'd have to do the work to make up that world," he says. "And in *Gone Home* there wasn't a lot of digital technology, so we started thinking, 'What if it's integrally about digital technology surrounding these characters?' We just had to give ourselves those new questions to answer."

That naturally involved finding a new way to tell a story. "We wanted to be able to use our skills that we had developed on *Gone Home*, but also we were wondering how to keep things interesting," studio co-founder **Karla Zimonja** says. "So we started thinking about what we could layer on top of it, and eventually we realised that it was a totally new idea for us to have human forms in that space with you."

The plan was to still allow players the room to explore the station at their own pace without the pressure of anyone looking over their shoulder or judging them on their actions, while bringing other characters within closer proximity. "At the same time, we didn't want to have somebody standing in the room with you saying, 'Why are you throwing that stuff all over the floor?'" Gaynor laughs. That's where the idea of AR technology came in, giving the characters a physical representation without a more tangible presence in the present; they're with you in space, but not in time.

Fullbright decided that players should be able to manipulate Tacoma's recordings, ensuring they could be paused and rewound, and that each of the participants could be tracked during conversations as they moved from room to room. This would afford the player more of an active role in proceedings, rather than simply inviting them to follow a paper trail. "Like a lot of stuff in *Tacoma* it was a very gradual process," Gaynor says. "We had to consider what the component pieces were, what they meant for us and how we were going to apply them, as opposed to just starting from this one crystalline idea."



Making characters' movements feel authentic took some time. "It was like playing with a dollhouse," Gaynor says

"PART OF IT WAS, 'OUR LAST GAME WAS SET IN THE '90S, THIS ONE IS GOING TO BE SET IN THE FUTURE'"

All this, of course, had to tie into the design of the Tacoma itself, with the layout helping inform the flow of the story. Environment designer **Kate Craig** and level designers Nina Freeman and Tynan Wales would lay out an early version of each of the ship's modules, with Gaynor subsequently working out where the six main characters needed to be. "And then at that point, the story, level art, sound, animation and all the other elements could react to that," he says. From Craig's point of view, it meant that "the humanity came in at the end". Much of her early work involved building Tacoma's various spaces, before adding the personal touches that help express so much of the individual personalities in the later stages of development. "The further we went into the game, and then the more [Steve and Karla] were comfortable with who these people were, the more I had to work with," she explains.

This new approach represented an unusual scripting challenge for Gaynor, whose process involved writing drafts in a notebook before discussing them with Zimonja and hashing out the story together. To ensure a greater naturalism, characters would have to move around the ship during the recordings, sometimes taking part in separate conversations. "If you're writing a cutscene, it's just a screenplay," Gaynor says. "If you're writing a branching dialogue scene, it has a flow-chart shape to it. But with a scene in *Tacoma* you're writing a bunch of smaller scenes that all have to line up with each other in really specific ways. That was a weird process to work through."

And not just from a writing perspective. "It's a very physical thing too," Craig adds. "If, say, Clive talks for 15 seconds and he's walking, then that means that this particular hallway has to be however many units long, and then if we change the length of the dialogue, then we might have to change the length of the hallway." Any changes or cuts to the dialogue inevitably had a domino effect, which resulted in Craig and animator Noël Clark getting together to discuss how the physical elements might change, whether it meant tweaking the size of a room or corridor, or getting the characters to stop in one place to continue their conversation. "We didn't consciously realise until later in the project, but there aren't that many games where literally every piece talks to every other piece," Gaynor says.

If space was one of the most important considerations, so too was time: to ensure the conversations matched up, the team had to check how long the lines would take to deliver. As such, they had to rehearse and block out scenes themselves in advance of recording the dialogue with voice actors. "Yeah, we totally displayed our sweet acting skills for one another," Zimonja grins. All of the dialogue was recorded as an ensemble, with all six cast members on a soundstage performing the scenes as a group. The sessions were recorded, but there was no motion capture involved: rather, the performances were used as video reference by Clark, who hand-animated the in-game avatars. Fullbright's own rehearsals supplied extra visual reference points, and Gaynor and Zimonja ▶

were delighted to note that some of their own postures, gestures and physical tics found their way into Clark's work, adding an extra personal touch to the characterisation.

"But that was important," Zimonja says, "because mo-cap honestly would have been too literal. We needed stuff to be a little bit more pointed; more than we could have asked from an actor." Indeed, if there's an expressiveness – a certain theatricality, even – to some of the animations, that's all quite deliberate, since it had to compensate for the absence of facial features. "We wanted it to feel naturalistic, but also pantomime, because you're just seeing the shape and the motion of the bodies of the characters," Gaynor says, explaining that he never showed the actors how their characters would look in-game to discourage them from exaggerating the physical aspects of their performances. "'Pushed naturalism' is probably the best way I can put it," Zimonja adds. "We definitely wanted very readable gestures and postures, but just a little bit more [than normal] because that's all you have. So that was a pretty cool animation challenge."

By that time, the Tacoma itself had undergone quite substantial changes. Fullbright had originally conceived it as a public-facing station, designed for space tourism for a wealthy clientele with a more opulent aesthetic that can be glimpsed in the announcement trailer that was unveiled during Microsoft's E3 briefing in 2015. There was an Upstairs, Downstairs dynamic, Zimonja says, with separate quarters for the rich and for the station's staff. But there was a problem. "Those big public spaces just don't lend themselves to the kind of games that we make," Gaynor tells us. "Because they're for public consumption, they don't have any evidence of the people who actually lived and worked there." The decision was taken to rework it entirely, making it a commercial station, only ever occupied by its crew. "All of that space is then owned by the crew, as far as them being able to leave evidence of themselves there," Gaynor continues. "It was an intentional choice so that all the environments could say something about the crew."

For Craig, perhaps surprisingly, it meant less visual research than she'd undertaken for *Gone Home*. "There we had very specific things that we needed to call back to, with materials and objects that were like touchstones that everyone in North America would recognise as [being from] the '90s," she says. The speculative nature of *Tacoma*'s story meant she needed more guidance from the writing, with Gaynor wanting the station's environments to exude a "toothless, corporate idea of cool". So where to start? "We looked at a lot of Virgin Atlantic stuff," he laughs. "These places where it's a very approved-by-committee, not too challenging version of something between a casino, a hotel, and the space station from 2001."

This might be the future, but the technology isn't exactly sleek. The hardware player-character Amy uses to download the station's data is large and unwieldy, and there's a rudimentary quality to the interfaces used on the ship. "It's like when ▶



Q&A

Steve Gaynor
Co-founder, Fullbright

Music plays a key role, particularly in the more character-led moments.
Music is really important to us. Some of that comes from working on the *Bioshock* series, where an evocative piece can start playing over the PA and totally change the tenor of the space. And in *Gone Home*, when you find one of the tapes that Sam is listening to and put it in the tape player or you turn on a record player in Dad's study – it tells you what it feels like to be around that person, even though they're not present.



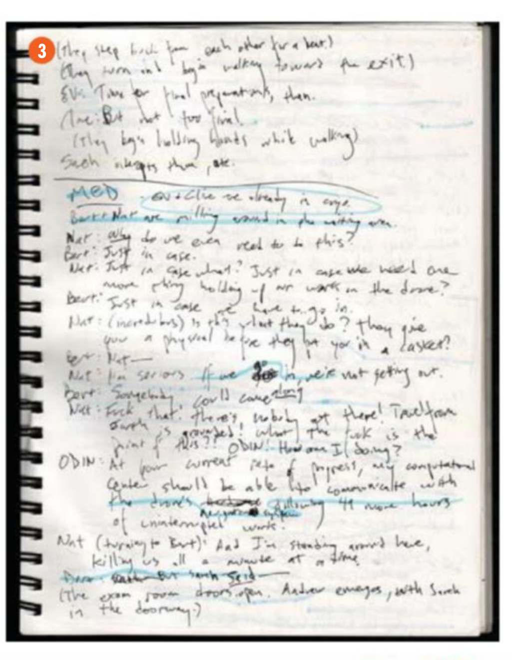
What were the main challenges of making a larger-scale game with a bigger team?
I think in future we're going to put more time into exploring the specific stuff that goes into the game before we start heavier development. On a bigger game like *Tacoma* if you don't quite have everything nailed down when people are working on it, it's harder to make adjustments as you go. Most of it's process-based, I think – finding that balance is probably something that all teams are learning to deal with as they go.

Fullbright's games have a strong narrative focus. Is that the kind of game you're drawn to in your spare time?
I definitely like games that have strong characterisation and good writing. I keep up with the kind of games I feel are kind of adjacent to ours, but I also spend a lot of time playing big triple-A games. Some of my favourite games this year were *Resident Evil 7*, *Wolfenstein II* and *Prey*, where there's just a little bit of Venn diagram overlap. But I also spent a lot of time playing *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*, and that really doesn't have *anything* in common with what we do. (laughs)



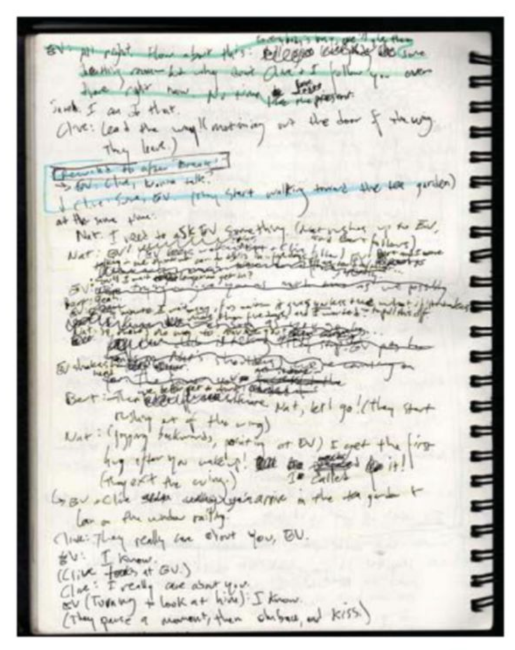





3

(They step back from each other for a beat)
(They turn and begin walking towards the exit)
EV: Time for final preparations, then.
Clive: But not too final.
(They begin holding hands while walking)
Sarah interrupts them, etc.

MED — EV + Clive are already in surgery.
Bert + Nat are milling around in the waiting area.
Nat: Why do we even need to do this?
Bert: Just in case.
Nat: Just in case what? Just in case we need one more thing holding up our work on the drone?
Bert: Just in case we have to go in.
Nat: (incredulous) Is this what they do? They give you a physical before they put you in a casket?
Bert: Nat—
Nat: I'm serious. If we go in, we're not getting out.
Bert: Somebody could come along
Nat: Fuck that! There's nobody out there! Travel from Earth is grounded! What the fuck is the point of this?! ODIN! How am I doing?
ODIN: At your current rate of progress, my computational center should be able to communicate with the drone's navigation system following 44 more hours of uninterrupted work.
Nat (turning to Bert): And I'm standing around here, killing us all a minute at a time.
(The exam room doors open. Andrew emerges, with Sarah in the doorway.)


EV: All right. How about this: ... right now. No time like the present.
Sarah: I am for that.
Clive: Lead the way! (motioning out the door of the wing they leave.)
Rewind to after break
→ EV: Clive, Come walk.
↓ Clive: Sure, EV. (they start walking toward the tea garden)
at the same time:
Nat: I need to ask EV something. (Nat rushes up to EV, and Bert follows)
...
Bert: ... Nat, let's go! (they start rushing out of the wing)
Nat: (jogging backwards, pointing at EV) I get the first hug after you wake up! I called it!
(they exit the wing.)
↳ EV + Clive arrive in the tea garden + lean on the window railing.
Clive: They really care about you, EV.
EV: I know.
(Clive looks at EV.)
Clive: I really care about you.
EV (Turning to look at him): I know.
(They pause a moment, then embrace, and kiss.)

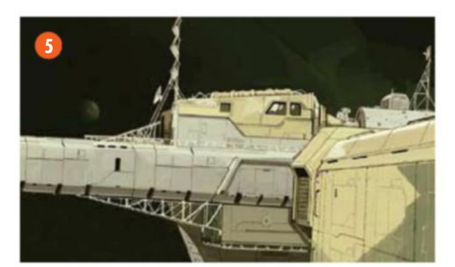
Player-character Amy **1** was "always around" from the early stages of development, Gaynor says, when *Tacoma* was set in, well, Tacoma. But back then station administrator E.V. St. James **2** was the central character – and a professional folk singer. The story and the setting changed, but she kept her guitar. Once Gaynor had started drafting the script **3**, he and Zimonja would take different coloured highlighters to mark conversations that would take place separately and then later merge. Following these exchanges isn't mandatory: once you've installed the data-transfer device **4** in any wing of the ship, you can wait half an hour in real time for the upload to complete. We wouldn't recommend it, of course



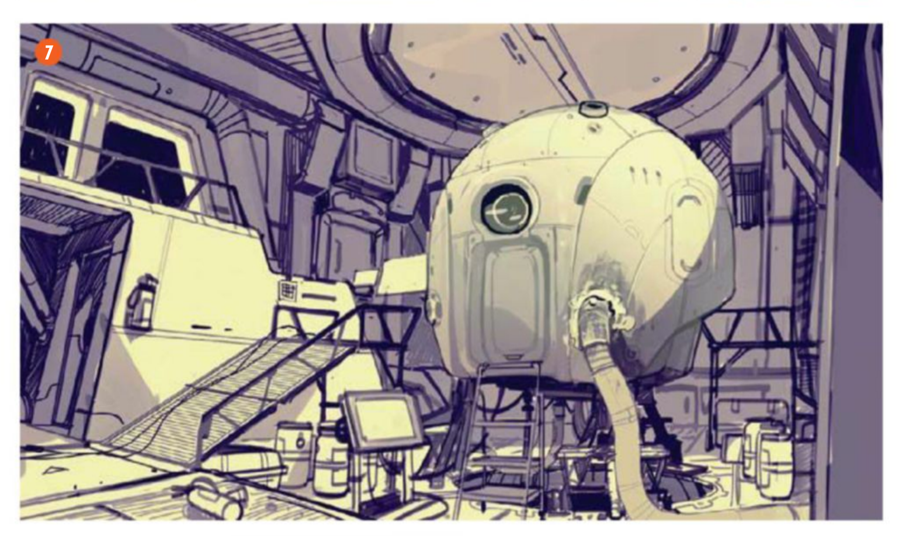
you go to a library and they're still using an OS from ten years ago or something," Craig says. Yet this more grounded vision of the future fits with the game's fiction, in the sense that we're witnessing a group of everyday people doing an unglamorous job that just happens to be 200,000 miles from Earth. But the player experience was also a consideration behind the tech. "It had to be accessible," Zimonja says. "And I think we would rather make it accessible via understandings you already have about how you interact with media and how computers work in the real world rather than introducing this whole new paradigm." Gaynor nods. "I think you gain more in terms of believability from almost underselling the impressiveness of the tech," he adds. "If it's very flashy and 'wow', then you're thinking more about the presentation. Whereas if it's mundane and it's not jumping out at you, it feels more natural to be in that space. I think regardless of how many dollars we might have had to play with, less is more in that sense."

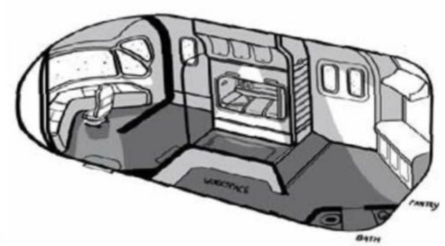
Making the UI less obtrusive is just one way Fullbright is keen to get out of the player's way. *Tacoma* isn't a game that withholds key information until you've completed a certain number of tasks; rather it trusts the player to find the story – which inevitably means much of it is optional. The idea that some players might miss character beats or background details is a worthwhile trade-off for affording others the freedom to engage with the narrative on their own terms. "Things are laid out such that the most important trunk of the story tree is more easily findable," Zimonja says. "Other stuff by definition is going to be a little harder to get at. But we wanted people's curiosity to carry them through the game, and that is more important than literally ensuring that the player sees everything."

A warm response from critics and players suggests those who have ventured onboard have enjoyed putting those pieces together, even if *Tacoma* hasn't come close to matching *Gone Home*'s remarkable success. Gaynor is sanguine about the situation, suggesting it would have been like winning the lottery twice in a row. "We were really spoiled with *Gone Home* – I mean, we made a game in our basement – and it'd be foolish to expect all of our games to do so well. What's important to us is that we made a game we're proud of, that people are excited about, and that is selling [enough] to help us keep doing what we do." In other words: mission accomplished. ■



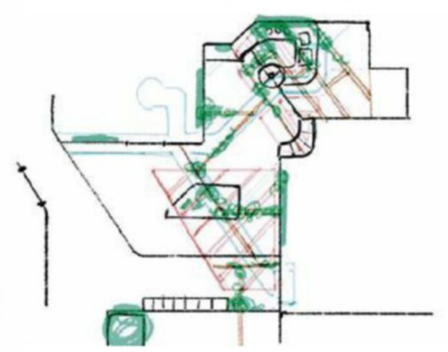


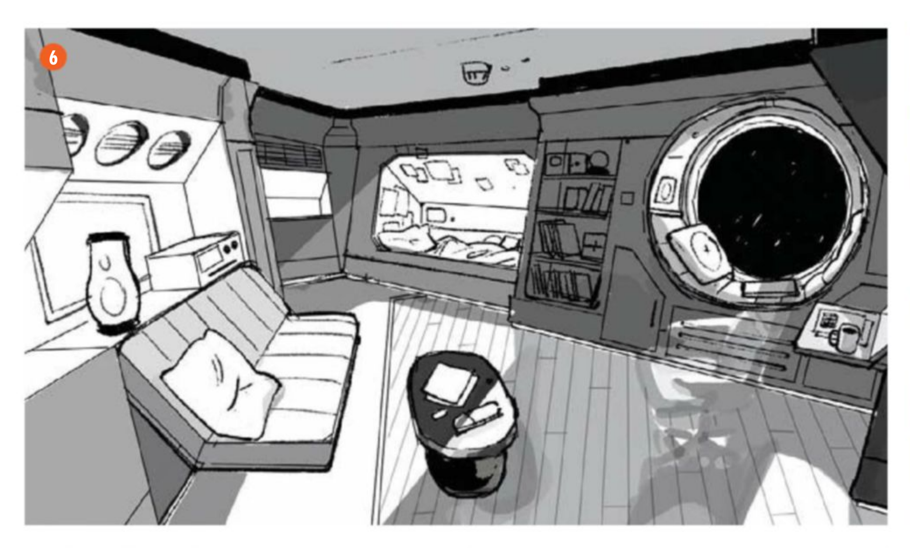














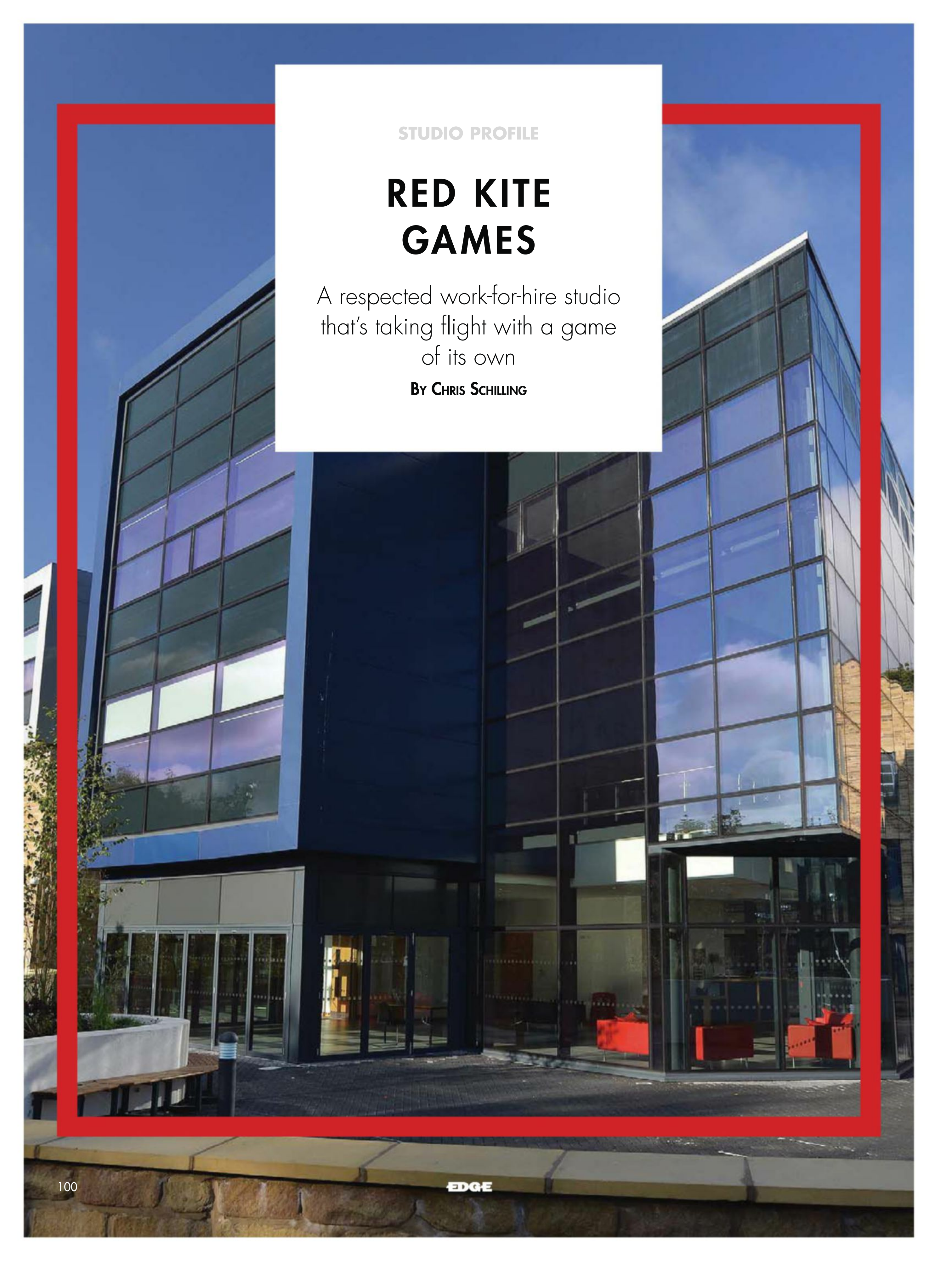






Fullbright approached Brooklyn-based illustrator Rebecca Mock to provide a range of concepts, from the Tacoma's exterior 5 to the crew bunks 6 and the drone bay 7 where the crew try to jury rig an escape pod. "We knew we wanted to talk about the everyday people that have these kinds of workaday jobs in our future," Gaynor says. "We were inspired by the crew of Alien and Sam Rockwell's character in Moon, where people are working in space, but just trying to get by, they're worried about getting their paycheque and all that stuff." While the ending leaves the fate of certain characters in limbo, it reaches a clear point of closure, with Amy leaving in her ship 8 with the Tacoma's AI, 9 Odin. "We wanted to give you that feeling where you didn't really know what Amy's motivations were until the end," Gaynor says. "We were always moving in that direction, but it definitely took us a while to figure out exactly what format it took."





STUDIO PROFILE

RED KITE GAMES

A respected work-for-hire studio that's taking flight with a game of its own

By Chris Schilling



Founded 2012
Employees 25
Key staff Simon Iwaniszak (founder, managing director), David Roberts (creative director), Andrew Greensmith (technical director)
URL redkitegames.co.uk
Selected softography *Call Of Duty: Strike Team*, *God Of War III Remastered*, *Extreme Exorcism*, *Nom Nom Galaxy*
Current projects *Hollowpoint*, *Crackdown 3*, *Dead Island 2*

Turning down the chance to work on one of the world's biggest games was probably the toughest choice of **Simon Iwaniszak**'s career. In the end, it might turn out to be the wisest. Iwaniszak had been with Rockstar Leeds for close to five years, having worked on the likes of *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars* and *Red Dead Redemption*. He'd just finished work on *LA Noire*, and he knew exactly what was coming next. *Grand Theft Auto V* was, of course, a tempting offer, but Iwaniszak had always had an ambition to start his own business, and the prospect of another long dev cycle made his decision easier. "I knew if I went onto that project, because of the way that I am, I wouldn't leave until the game was done," he tells us. He and Rockstar parted ways in April 2011. By the following January, after a brief spell with fellow Rockstar alumni Double Eleven, Iwaniszak had founded Red Kite Games.

Those Rockstar connections helped ensure that it wasn't too long before the studio had its first big break. The Blast Furnace had been founded by a group of ex-Rockstar and ex-Team 17 staff, and Iwaniszak's connections meant the studio had someone to turn to when it needed extra resources to help finish mobile *Call Of Duty* spin-off *Strike Team* for Activision. "It was a massive deal for us," Iwaniszak admits. "It helped establish us and take us from being almost, 'Is this business going to work?' to us having something substantial to work towards." The original plan was for two months of contract work, but Red Kite ended up seeing the game through to completion alongside The Blast Furnace. "I've learned over the past six years that contract extensions with your partners generally mean you're doing a good job," Iwaniszak smiles.

At the time, Red Kite boasted just five staff: two artists, two programmers, and Iwaniszak as the lead designer. But this was the foot in the door it needed. Clearly pleased with its efforts on *Strike Team*, Activision gave the studio more work, helping out with the publisher's mobile catalogue, including *Pitfall* and *Wipeout*. "We started to see the benefits of repeat work quite early on," Iwaniszak says. With a reliable source of income, Red Kite's founder was keen to grow the studio and figure out what its next move should be.

"I felt we needed to become platform-holder-ready and publisher-ready," Iwaniszak continues. "At that point we invested a lot of work in getting the studio properly set up so that we were registered developers with Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo and Steam, making sure we had everything in place security-wise so that if we were going to work with these partners, they'd have the assurances that we were set up to be able to do those things."


FROM LEFT **David Roberts, Simon Iwaniszak and Andrew Greensmith all worked together at Rockstar Leeds**

For a small studio, such a significant investment in infrastructure was a risky move, but Iwaniszak's gamble paid off. After its work with Activision, Red Kite assisted Double Eleven with the genre-bending *Nom Nom Galaxy*, but then a much larger project fell into its lap when Sony's Santa Monica Studio needed help porting *God Of War III* to PS4. It was at this point that Iwaniszak realised the need to expand: opportunities were coming Red Kite's way on a regular basis, and it didn't have the bandwidth to take on some of the larger ones. But as fate would have it, two of his Rockstar contacts became available, and David Roberts and Andrew Greensmith were duly recruited as fellow directors. "As a result, I was able to start taking off some of the hats I'd been wearing to give to those guys, which allowed me to then take a step away from development and focus more on purely running the business," Iwaniszak says.

"I'VE LEARNED THAT CONTRACT EXTENSIONS WITH PARTNERS GENERALLY MEAN YOU'RE DOING A GOOD JOB"

He has overseen a broad and varied portfolio over the last six years. As someone who's worn both creative and business hats, how does he decide which projects the studio should take on? "It varies, really," he says. "We have different ways of evaluating it, because we certainly don't just take on work because we need money." It is, he explains, a matter of finding the value in a project, whether it be partnering with a studio with which Red Kite is particularly keen to work, or the chance to work with a new technology – or even simply the chance to learn something. "We analyse it in different ways and then come to a conclusion, and I think our portfolio speaks for that," he says. *Extreme Exorcism*, made with Ripstone and Golden Ruby Games, was one such project; in that instance, it was simply a matter of Red Kite's staff playing the game and enjoying it so much that a deal was quickly agreed. While it's amassed a reputation as a safe pair of hands, the diversity of his company's output has been crucial in securing a broader range of projects. These days, Iwaniszak says, it's rare that he can't point to at least one game within the company's portfolio as evidence of its expertise in a specific field.

Before its expansion, Red Kite had around 10 staff, but now its numbers have swelled to 25, it's been able to accept bigger offers: at the moment, for example, it's helping Sumo Digital make *Crackdown 3* and *Dead Island 2*. But it's also afforded it the room to develop a third project – not of the same scope as those two, certainly, but one that's clearly every bit as important to the studio. Strictly speaking, *Hollowpoint* is not its first self-built game: mobile titles *Firefly Runner* and *Dream Machine* were designed as ways to help get the creative juices flowing between work-for-hire projects. "If you stand them alongside some of the other work that we've done, then obviously they don't really compare," Iwaniszak says. "But they're just as precious and as important to us, because they're a part of our journey." ▶





The studio's directors prize polish and attention to detail, Iwaniszak says. "That really harks back to our Rockstar days, where we'd be striving for perfection all the time"

After six years of hard work, Iwaniszak believes Red Kite is finally in a position where it has earned the right to invest time and manpower in a larger project. "It was always part of our strategy," he says. "It was at some point last year when we decided we were going to push forward with an original IP. We thought this time that we wanted to be more ambitious, we wanted to go for a PC and console game. But at that point we weren't quite sure exactly how we were going to go about it." That's when an unexpected opportunity presented itself, and Red Kite was able to acquire an existing property to develop. The name might sound familiar to some: *Hollowpoint* is based on an idea that originated at Ruffian Games that was left behind after its partnership with publisher Paradox Interactive collapsed. It's been rebuilt from scratch, but the concept is similar: it's a 2.5D action game where players control a band of mercenaries in the 23rd century, taking on missions for mega-corporations that have risen up after the collapse of the world's governments.

We're given a glimpse of an early build of the game, six months of work forming a vertical slice that Red Kite will soon be showing off to publishers, hoping for a nibble. Creative director David Roberts walks through a mission in which a pair of mercs infiltrate a research facility. Lone players can switch between the two, with the other controlled by the AI, but it's designed with co-op in mind. Exploration is on a 2D plane, but combat allows you to aim at targets in the background, while taking cover to avoid returning fire. It's very much in the vein of XBLA favourite *Shadow Complex* – no bad thing – but its procedurally generated stages should make it more versatile and replayable. "The levels can be arranged in different configurations; rooms, time of day, weather, enemy placement and objectives can be randomised as well," Roberts explains.

There's a metagame layer, too, as well as a competitive element when you're playing either locally or online. "Everything you destroy has a dollar value," Roberts says. "That can affect the bottom line of the mega-corporations, and might cause their stock to plummet. We're planning on having a dynamic flow of their influence over the globe based on the missions you complete. If you really pummel a particular corporation you can force them out of a particular region." Your approach may also affect the missions available to you. Take out a key target without raising the alarm and you'll gain a reputation as a silent assassin; go in all guns blazing and you'll be approached by corporations wanting you to raze rival facilities to the ground.

Promising stuff, then, and indeed the *Hollowpoint* team is so excited about the game that Iwaniszak, keen to foster a healthy work/life balance among his staff, has found himself having to tell people to leave the office and go home. "It's nice to be in that scenario," he admits. "I spent a lot of time at the start building the right kind of environment and workplace that I hoped people would be happy and creative in, and that would encourage people to come and work here." That approach seems to have yielded positive results: in the studio's six years of operation, just two staff have left. When people join Red Kite, they tend to stick around. "It's just about trying to treat our staff right and help them in whatever way they might need. That's really important for the vibe and the culture of the studio."

By and large, the teams on Red Kite's work-for-hire projects and those working on *Hollowpoint* are kept separate, though experienced staffers on both sides will naturally share expertise when it makes sense to do so. But while developing its own game has given the studio a creative boost, Iwaniszak is well aware that Red Kite needs to focus on its bread and butter. "We're never going to let the work-for-hire stuff fall away," he says. "If I'm brutally honest, that's more important than *Hollowpoint*. With that, we can take a little bit more time and do things our way. What we can't do is let it in any way it affect the work that we've been doing over the six years to build the reputation we've got."

"I SPENT A LOT OF TIME BUILDING THE RIGHT KIND OF ENVIRONMENT THAT I HOPED PEOPLE WOULD BE HAPPY IN"

Its stock has been further boosted by a long-standing relationship with the University Of Huddersfield just over the road. For six years, Iwaniszak has been an affiliate partner, offering his services as a consultant for the university's games course, as well as providing guidance to final-year students. Two hours a week isn't much, he says, but it seems to have borne fruit in the overall quality of the course's graduates. And with the future of the company in mind, it's not hard to see why that's a positive thing. "It's really important to us to get out and about and engage with people that are going to be the next generation of game developers," he says, with a smile that makes it abundantly clear why he doesn't regret trading *Red Dead* for Red Kite. ■



1 Red Kite was responsible for developing the enemy AI on Double Eleven's *Nom Nom Galaxy*, as well as implementing singleplayer and multiplayer challenges.
2 Activision has relied on Red Kite to provide post-launch support for *Call Of Duty: Strike Team*.
3 The forthcoming *Hollowpoint* will be the studio's first internally developed PC and console release.
4 Red Kite's artists gave otherworldly platformer *Extreme Exorcism* a visual spit-and-polish.
5 Sumo Digital's *Dead Island 2* is one of the biggest games Red Kite's worked on. "There's no way we'd be able to get those projects in-house – maybe one day – but we want to continue to be able to work on those kind of games," Iwaniszak says.
6 The developer is evidently, and rightly proud of its work on 2015's *God Of War III* remaster, which saw the programming team tasked with porting a range of key systems



REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild Switch
For supposedly story-focused DLC, there's not much story in The Champions Ballad. Rather, this is a fresh series of trials, beginning with a fraught return to the Great Plateau and a weapon that's as deadly to Link as his opponents. There are no one-hit-kills thereafter, thankfully: locating and then completing outdoor challenges reveals a dozen more Shrines and a terrific final dungeon, while a surprising climactic battle unlocks a wonderfully silly – albeit useful – motorised reward. Who needs Epona?

Star Wars Battlefront II Xbox One
We're saving the story component of *Battlefront II*'s first major update until after we've seen The Last Jedi – deadlines, you understand – but it's the first signs of EA's rebuilding job that most intrigue. As expected, the early changes do the obvious, speeding up loot-box acquisition and opening up previously locked Star Card slots from the get-go. Baby steps, then, and there's an awfully long way to go. Insert your own 'galaxy far, far away' joke here.

Playerunknown's Battlegrounds Xbox One
PUBG Corp is really testing the concept of early access to its limits with a game that's been noticeably downgraded from its PC progenitor and somehow still manages to run worse. An often unintuitive control system – despite help from *Gears* developers The Coalition – hardly helps either. Luckily, the *PUBG* magic is present and correct; never before has a game been so good as to paper over such a litany of technical cracks.



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Cover stories

Ah, the cover, the last refuge of the band that's run out of ideas. Videogames are no stranger to the concept: indeed, a few too many trailer-makers have succumbed to the bizarre modern fascination with watered-down acoustic covers of famous songs. *Gears Of War*'s the worst culprit, with Mad World, The Sound Of Silence and Nothing Else Matters in its trailer back catalogue. Yet while it's a preferred tactic of the marketing bods, only rarely do we see the cover version become the theme of a game.

Yet in *Life Is Strange: Before The Storm* (p106), new studio Deck Nine picks up French studio Dontnod's ball and attempts to run with it. A prequel spin-off made on the other side of the Atlantic – and using, thanks to the voice actors' strike, a new cast – we approached *Before The Storm* with no little trepidation. Yet with its three-episode run now complete, we find a game that not only stays true to the original, but builds on it, too.



In Washington state, another cover emerges. The first *Destiny 2* expansion, *Curse Of Osiris* (p116), may be made within the same studio as the base game, but heralds the passing of the development torch to Bungie's live team. To the cynic, this means dev duties have been transferred from the guys that mess it up to the ones that clean up after them. It's not as successful as Deck Nine's effort, but we come away, as ever, cautiously optimistic about *Destiny*'s future.

However, *Gorogoa* (p110) shows the power of a singular vision undiluted by external influences. Jason Roberts spent six years working alone on this remarkable puzzle game, and you get the sense that it wouldn't have been the same game had anyone else been involved, or if anyone tried to copy it. If you've ever worked on the marketing for a *Gears Of War* game, we strongly urge you to play it.

Life Is Strange: Before The Storm

They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Indeed, it's charming when, towards the end of *Life Is Strange: Before The Storm*, Chloe Price dyes a chunk of her hair blue: an unconscious tribute to her crush, Rachel Amber, who wears a long blue feathered earring on the same side. Just 16, Price is clearly still figuring out her identity, magpieing elements of those around her and repurposing them into a new image.

What an apt reflection of *Before The Storm*. A three-episode spin-off born of the popularity of Dontnod's choice-based episodic drama *Life Is Strange*, it is designed to tell the story of the events that lead up to Max Caulfield's time-bending tale – and to delve further into the character and past of Chloe Price. Its entire existence, therefore, is inextricably tied to something more seminal, more self-assured. There are times when *Before The Storm*'s awed reverence of the older kid leaves it, inevitably, struggling to escape from beneath its shadow. But there are also moments in which Deck Nine's protégé takes its role model's best qualities and runs with them, creating not just a valid addition to Dontnod's canon, but an experience with a distinct personality of its own.

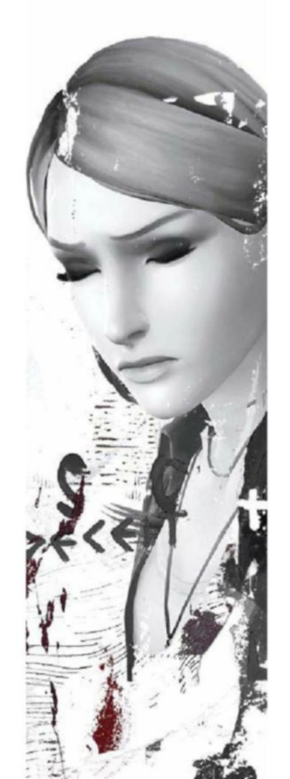
With its development of the StoryForge toolset, a renewed focus on narrative craft, and Square Enix's blessing, Deck Nine has found a voice with which it can sing. It's hard not to see the exercise as mere mimicry at first. To Deck Nine's credit, the *Life Is Strange* aesthetic has been perfectly recreated, all wistful indie rock and sketched button-prompts for dialogue choices as you shuffle Price around Arcadia Bay.

The small-town feel is redoubled for returning fans; everything is almost exactly as you left it. Blackwell Academy's lawns are bathed in the ever-autumnal glow of its red brickwork; Price's bedroom is a familiar mess; the junkyard reprises its role as both retreat and battleground. Posters, desktops and souvenirs scattered about encourage that same level of intimacy between player and place. Deck Nine has Dontnod's world-building tricks down pat. Every poke and prod reveals something about the current climate of Arcadia Bay, or the lives of its residents. It's also heartening to, once again, be given the option to take a load off, whether on a bench or a bed, letting our heroine mull over the consequences of our choices. Even the occasionally clunky writing returns in conversation, for which we're tempted to give Deck Nine the benefit of the doubt – a vote of support for the first game's often cringeworthy teenage realism. And, everywhere you turn, there are nods (of varying degrees of subtlety) to the original adventure. Another thirsty pot plant is a lovely touch, but the cupboard full of beans is a bit much – and if we see one more Hawt Dawg Man, we might scream.

Despite the constant throwbacks, however, *Before The Storm* isn't afraid to cast Arcadia Bay in new light.

Developer Deck Nine
Publisher Square Enix
Format PC, PS4 (both tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

Deck Nine has placed obvious priority on the heroines' loveably awkward banter and fiery confrontations



Deck Nine has drilled deeper into the human-interest aspect of the series, amplifying and refining its easy relatability. Untroubled by *Life Is Strange*'s supernatural stresses, its citizens wrestle with more mundane problems. Enter Price, promoted from sidekick to star – and Amber, a mere memory of a girl in Caulfield's outing, still present and correct three years before the events of *Life Is Strange*. Although the two struggle with different issues, Deck Nine's writing creates real points of commonality between them, making their burgeoning relationship all the more believable. The death of Price's father (and best friend Max going AWOL) sends her into a tailspin as she tries to come to terms with her disrupted life. In Amber, she finds a kindred spirit. As tales of forest fires, shady drug deals and marital infidelities unfold, uncooperative adults obscuring the truth at every turn, Price and Amber turn to each other for understanding – and, depending on your dialogue choices, perhaps a romantic connection.

Carefully handled and thoroughly convincing, Price and Amber's relationship powers the narrative almost entirely. Deck Nine has placed obvious priority on the heroines' loveably awkward banter and fiery confrontations. Unfortunately, this is to the detriment of almost every supporting character, who – barring one or two exceptions – fall disappointingly flat. The previously nuanced relationship between Price, her mother and new stepfather is treated with an awfully heavy hand, with no believable development arc to be found or forced between the three. Meanwhile, the usually sharply multifaceted series bully Victoria Chase might as well be a cardboard cutout in a pantomime moustache, popping up briefly as a clichéd device in a scene to bring Price and Amber closer.

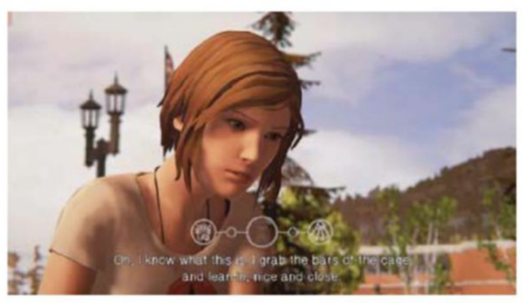
But, while Amber is a charismatic watch, it's Deck Nine's portrayal of Price that deserves commendation. Without Caulfield's time-bending superpowers, and confronted with an adult world built on secrets and lies, Price's – and the player's – greatest strength becomes the manipulation of words. The new Backtalk system is a considered synchronisation of *Before The Storm*'s narrative thrust and Price's personality. Blue speech bubbles occasionally appear around dialogue choices: select the option, and a tactical slanging match begins, as you confront the character in the way of your next objective. Listening to your opponent's rebuttal, and picking up on certain words they use, informs your next choice. An argument with stepfather David, who blusters about army-style discipline, can be swayed by insisting that you "didn't enlist". The new mechanic is a shrewd substitution, a realistic way of slipping into Price's combat boots: there's an air of both flippant improvisation and slight panic as a short timer ticks down beside your every choice of comeback. ▶



RIGHT Deck Nine has done its homework: this non-choice recalls one from *Life Is Strange*, driving the point of this emotional scene home. It's a shame that the writing in the vignette is a little hammy.
MAIN A game of 'two truths and a lie' offers a chance to get to know both Price and Amber better, and even has a different outcome should you try to cheat.
BOTTOM This solution to the original game's occasional lack of clarity is unmistakably Price: a button press has our heroine check hastily scrawled notes on her hand







ABOVE The new Backtalk mechanic is a perfect match for confrontations and boss fights in the Dungeons & Dragons game. It's unthinkable that this lengthy, wonderfully realised scene is optional: it's not to be missed

The series' expositional journal returns. Price is handy with a pen, and her love of art becomes a fitting mechanical replacement for Caulfield's Polaroids: you can tag certain spots in Arcadia Bay with a choice of graffiti

It's not always so slickly written, but the consequences of Backtalk's outcome are always gratifyingly immediate and clear, and its uses are creative: one argument with a security guard denying access to the dormitories is riotously funny, while a tense head-to-head in the final episode sees Price twisting her attacker's words to her own ends in an altogether different, non-confrontational way, reflecting her change in personality. Indeed, by game's end, it becomes clear that Deck Nine has not only paid note-perfect homage to the character of Price, but has also meaningfully developed it. She is all but unrecognisable, vulnerable in her capacity to care. It's a shame, however, that Ashly Burch's stand-in, seems to have run out of steam by episode three: the desired effect of Deck Nine's delicate portraiture is dampened by two-dimensional voice work.

And, ultimately, it's an overall lack of another dimension that is sorely missed. Faithfully recreating *Life Is Strange*'s relatable drama on a less supernatural scale has resulted in something wonderfully intimate. In another sense, however, you'll feel oddly futher away from it. The Backtalk system marries *Before The Storm*'s narrative and mechanical themes of storytelling and communication with Price's lippy-turned-empathetic character arc. But *Life Is Strange*'s time-rewinding conceit went one better, at once tying together Caulfield's self-consciousness, making a wider point about the themes of fate and choice – and, eventually, even the player's own habits and tendencies in their desperation to gamify destiny.

In *Life Is Strange*, key choices (unable to be reversed by Caulfield) are weightier, their consequences far more affecting than anything *Before The Storm* has to offer. Indeed, a late-game key choice in *Before The Storm* serves to make the cut-and-pasted mechanic look redundant twice over. Of *course* Price can't reverse it, just like all her previous dialogue – but deciding whether to say Price likes or doesn't like her stepdad pales in comparison to some of the tough choices the original game put in front of you. The mundanity of everyday teenage life is a crucial part of *Life Is Strange*, too, but it's the interplay of small moments with big themes that lend Caulfield's adventure a substance that robs *Before The Storm* of true equivalency.

Then again, who wants to be equivalent anyway? When *Before The Storm* embraces its individuality, it produces stunning moments. In the absence of the original's time-twisting puzzles, Deck Nine has had to get creative – and has crafted some vignettes more memorable and touching than many of *Life Is Strange*'s scenes, perfectly suited to the medium of dialogue choices and bolstered by the strength of its character writing. We won't forget our tabletop adventure played on the benches in a hurry; we feel the same rush in our teasing game of 'two truths and a lie' on a train ride away from the world, and in the improvisational, starry-eyed magic of a rendition of The Tempest. It's a thrill of recognition, but also of the unexpected. Deck Nine appears to know *Life Is Strange* and its Price better than we could have imagined. It has taken pains not to imitate either. In doing so, the studio has found room to tell a story, however derivative, with both sincerity and its own identity – true to the series, true to Chloe Price and, ultimately, true to itself.

7



CREDITS DUE

Before The Storm does an admirable job of setting up the story arcs of *Life Is Strange* for its various characters. But Rachel Amber and Chloe Price's tale is far from fully told by the end, with a fair chunk of time between the two games still unaccounted for. If you were expecting more insight into Amber's relationship with Arcadia Bay drug dealer Frank Bowers, or an explanation as to why the two heroines eventually grow apart, you will be disappointed. Hold out for the post-credits scene, however – you'll catch a bone-chilling glimpse of a pivotal scene merely hinted at in *Life Is Strange*.

Post Script

Zak Garriss, lead writer, Life Is Strange: Before The Storm

Zak Garriss began his industry career as a designer at 38 Studios, working on the ill-fated EA RPG *Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning*. Since then he's been a teacher, a TV researcher and a writer before joining Deck Nine as narrative director in 2016. Here, he discusses how a new studio made a spin-off to a beloved story – with a little help from a bard.



How did you go about replicating *Life Is Strange*'s detailed choice system for *Before The Storm*?
Dontnod hasn't worked with us directly on *Before The Storm* – we've shared work, shown what we're doing. But when it comes to the ways in which we intersect with the lore and narratives of the first game, it's really just a product of our own fanatical passion, and how much we appreciated and respected what *Life Is Strange* is. Choice and consequence is such a huge part of the franchise, and something we think very deeply about.

***Life Is Strange*'s narrative and mechanics all work in service of exploring the idea of fate and destiny. Did you set out to do something similar with *Before The Storm*?**
It's quite extraordinary, how the mechanics, the themes and the final choice all play together. To recreate that, it's really hard! The harmony they achieved there with the first game is seldom done.

Where I found daylight – a way through that made sense and that seemed to honour the story we were telling – was shifting away from the core mechanic of rewinding time. That's about subverting fate; *Before The Storm* wasn't going to have that. Chloe's figuring out how to be a person. After taking some hard hits in life, and having her hope in a good future threatened, Chloe's figuring out how to relate to people.

It's the sort of performance we all go through when we're learning how to build relationships: there's a performative aspect to that. Being the kind of person we are – we want to be, we choose to be, we're not realising that we're being – in the lives of those around us. For me, it was looking at and investigating Chloe's quest to figure out what kind of a person she's going to be in the wake of losing her father. It was about keeping it small. Even though we're not threatening the lives of a town, and it doesn't live in that epic register, I hope it will resonate strongly with fans and their own personal experiences.

"I hope it will resonate strongly with fans and their own personal experiences"

The production of The Tempest is one of the game's most striking scenes. What inspired it?
We created the play for a lot of reasons – there's a lot of good stuff there. But on a certain level, it's about performance, it's about pretending, it's about fantasy and choosing to dwell on that, when you choose to break from it and why. Even that, I think, ended up doing work towards the game's final decision.



We found Price strangely muted in episode three, when we expected her feistiness to hit its peak. Why take things in the other direction?
We're in this moment where Chloe's relationship with Rachel, whether romantic or not, is stronger than it's ever been. And Chloe, in the landscape of her life, in this moment, might be happier than we've ever seen her. So in episode three, we wanted to explore a Chloe that you haven't seen, a Chloe that maybe feels like she doesn't need to be so angry all the time. Nothing's stopping her – but it's from a place of confidence or contentment, that a person who's gone through a lot of grief only feels when they have a reason to get out of bed in the morning. This is the episode where Chloe has a really great reason to get out of bed, and it's Rachel.

It's a bit like Batman, is sometimes the way I think about her. I love Batman as a character – he's fascinating, he's dangerous, he's incredibly capable. But fundamentally, what Bruce Wayne deserves is not to have to be Batman. Like, he needs a vacation: he needs to let go of the fact that his parents were killed by a criminal, and not try to wage a one-man war against crime. He deserves a life. There's a kind of consumption of Batman, where I want him to be in Batman mode because that's more entertaining – but if I really cared about the character, maybe I would let him go off and just be a normal person. There's a spectacle to Chloe that's awesome, but part of it comes from her pain. I think, partly, I just wanted to give her the gift of some peace for a bit. I'm really curious to see how fans respond to this version of her.

***Before The Storm* is more overt than the original game about Price's sexuality. How important was it for you to represent that side of her?**
The work that Dontnod and Square Enix did in building that relationship between Max and Chloe, that was groundbreaking. It was delicate, and careful, and subtle. I think it pushed our collective boundaries a little bit, with regard to how comfortable we are with gay characters in our narratives. As a studio, we believe in inclusivity. We want to see more narratives in games and in general that are representative of the people who watch and play those stories. We thought, let's make a game that asks the player to choose an answer to the question, 'Why was Rachel so important to Chloe?' And let's go far with it – ask questions about sexuality and identity, ask the player to be 16 and dealing with that. We're really happy with the story that unfolded. ■

Gorogoa

Developer Buried Signal
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Format Android, iOS, PC (tested), Switch
Release Out now

Few games truly warrant an ovation; we're not often struck by the desire to break into spontaneous applause. But then few games are quite as consistently ingenious as *Gorogoa*. We're thinking in particular of one mid-game puzzle involving a cracked bell jar and a moth, which is woven with such intricacy it's almost hard to fathom how it was conceived, let alone put together. Either way, we were left shaking our heads, agog in delighted disbelief – and not for the only time. *Gorogoa*'s creator, artist Jason Roberts, has spent over six years developing his debut game, and in these moments of remarkable, meticulous craftsmanship you begin to understand what took him so long.

Its story is a wordless fable, a delicately illustrated tale of a boy – later a man – chasing the eponymous creature, a colourful behemoth both strikingly beautiful and imposingly dangerous. Rummaging through a cluttered cupboard, the boy finds a large bowl ideal for holding the five orbs he intends to collect as an offering of some kind, perhaps to gain the beast's favour. To obtain them, he'll need to pass through time, memories and dreams, via doors and other connections between panels in a 2x2 grid. You can shift these tiles around, zooming in and out, occasionally stacking or splitting them to solve conundrums and reveal new routes.

It's not an entirely unique idea. During those six years of development we've seen a similar trick pulled by mobile hit *Framed*, which invited us to rearrange comic-book stills to allow its noirish avatars to evade capture. And across two *Monument Valley* games, we've already played with the idea of perception becoming reality, where two different places become one when manoeuvred into position and viewed from a specific perspective. *Gorogoa*, however, is smarter than both: these may be fixed solutions that allow the boy to continue his journey, but it's more playful in its use – indeed, its conflation – of space and time. Its hand-drawn art and careful, evocative animation ensure this is a game of no little style, but there is more substance beyond that attractive surface.

A bird, a branch, an apple, a receptacle: *Gorogoa*'s first puzzle quickly establishes the ground rules, which Roberts cleverly builds upon over the two hours that follow. Steadily, if not imperceptibly, puzzles grow more layered and complex, to the point where it feels wholly natural to merge a ladder leaning against a wall with tracks on a railroad map, say, or to frame the lamp-lit head of an old man to form… well, that would be telling. It's a game of quiet epiphanies that will come more quickly to those paying close attention to the finer details of these illustrations, with their familiar shapes and recurring motifs. There are hints of the card game Roberts originally conceived, too. Some images can be separated into two layers; here, you'll find yourself leaving a suspicious outline in one corner as you seek to locate its match in another frame, like a seasoned card player waiting for the right moment to play their trump.

Gorogoa establishes an aura of lyrical mystery that compels you to stick at it



In a game of revelations, it's no surprise that lightbulbs play a key role. But you won't always be struck by flashes of insight. During the occasional sticking points, you'll need to take another careful look at your hand – or you can simply shuffle the pack. With a maximum of four tiles in play, and a limited number of objects to zoom in and out of, or rooms to pan across, you can occasionally brute-force a solution through trial and error, finding that magical connection without the inspirational thunderbolt such a fine piece of engineering arguably deserved. Still, it's less likely to happen in the latter stages, where images on an ornate rug are repurposed as directional instructions and a flower's petals become a literal cog in the machine. And even when you stumble across the right arrangement of panels through dumb luck, it's still easy to admire the way the pieces all slot together. Besides, in a game that requires you to hold a lot of information in your head at once, we'd rather have the odd happy accident than be left lost and aimless. In that light, Roberts' decision to remove spaces once they've outlived their usefulness seems shrewd: if any previously visited areas remain, it's a clue you're not quite done with them yet.

Even during those infrequent lulls where you're left feeling a little befuddled, *Gorogoa* establishes an aura of lyrical mystery that compels you to stick at it. Joel Corelitz's haunting, ethereal score sets a wistful, melancholic mood, capturing an aching sense of yearning – for something beyond our understanding, perhaps. That might explain why the story, while clearly a very personal tale, can feel a little elusive. There are moments that evoke the eager curiosity of a child, and the peril of heedlessly following your dreams; others celebrate the commonalities shared between two disparate objects by allowing us to physically bring them together. Otherwise, it's hard to know exactly what it's trying to say. This may simply be a natural consequence of its complexity: you're so focused on the individual pieces that it becomes harder to see the bigger picture. In a game that invites us to look up to the stars and then lets us pull them into our close orbit, how ironic that its narrative should remain beyond easy reach.

Which isn't to say that *Gorogoa* maintains an emotional distance for its duration; quite the opposite, in fact. Yes, at times it can be slightly austere, but you'll experience many moments of wonder and delight as you marvel at the interconnectedness of things in this beautiful, intimate picture-book universe. Rare are the games that can make us see the world a little differently; step outside and look around after playing *Gorogoa* and you'll realise it probably deserved that round of applause after all. ■

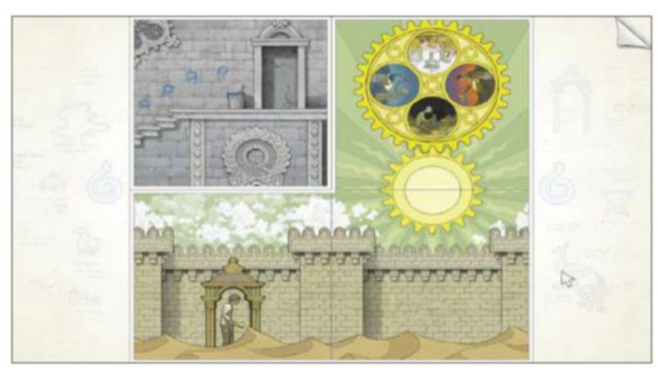
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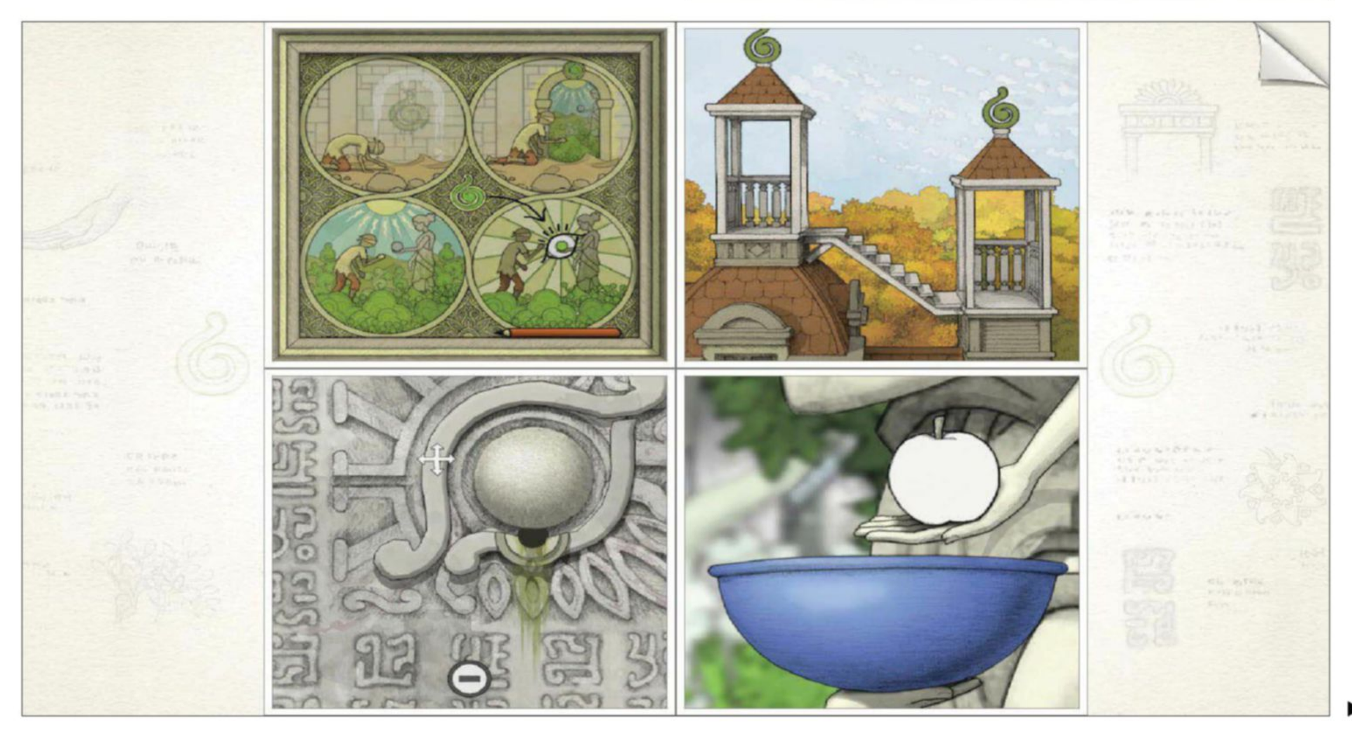


LEFT ***Gorogoa*****'s early visual clues are pretty transparent, but they serve to ease you in while it establishes its rules, and they get a lot subtler in later chapters.** **BELOW** **If the game already has a dreamlike quality, Roberts' original concept was apparently even more abstractly allegorical. The narrative may remain an enigma, but the structure is certainly coherent.** **MAIN** ***Gorogoa*** **was one of the first titles under the Annapurna banner, with a deal struck when it was still assembling its initial software slate**



ABOVE **Since the puzzles don't change,** ***Gorogoa*** **isn't especially replayable. Still, a second playthrough proves enlightening, giving you the opportunity to dig into the chronology of scenes – or simply to get lost in the details**





Post Script

Jason Roberts, creator, Gorogoa

Jason Roberts was working outside games as a software engineer when the first wave of successful indie games, spearheaded by Jonathan Blow's *Braid*, emerged – and suddenly his simmering creative impulses began to feel like a potentially viable new career path. *Gorogoa* began as first an interactive comic and then a card game/dominos hybrid before Roberts drilled down to the simplest realisation of his central idea: combining images with game-like rules. Here, he discusses the challenges he's encountered while making his debut.

Did the puzzle designs or the narrative elements come first?
The story came later. I built the original [2012] demo from loose, abstract themes. I was still exploring the story in my head and where I wanted it to go when I made that demo. I had to do a lot of head-scratching after it was out, and it was time to extend it to a complete game – to think about how I could enrich the story enough to support the length of a full game. One of the big challenges was that every scene also had to work as a puzzle piece. If I ever reached a point where I was making scenes and locations purely to function as part of a puzzle, then I was off track, and I would go back and throw that work out and start over again. Because when you think of a puzzle concept, you might think, 'Well, this needs these three pieces, so there needs to be three scenes', and then that forces the story to accommodate those scenes, and everything pushes back on everything else and it gets very complicated very quickly.

By contrast, how you interact with the game feels very intuitive. Were you keen to keep it as accessible as possible?
Early on I thought of it more in terms of design purity or minimalism. I mean, visually, the game is not minimalistic – it's very visually dense. But the verbs you use to play it are simple. I think I discovered the importance of accessibility as I started to kick the game out into the world and show it to people. And it was clear to me that it was accessible to a wider audience of people. That became very important to me. Because those interactions with people who don't play a lot of videogames were some of the more rewarding. I like the idea of the game as a found object, where you come across this thing and play with it to try and figure out how it works. So I think that also contributes to the accessibility, in that the game is designed to work without or with very little tutorial. As though you had come across this illustrated tile and started playing with it and discovered that it has magical properties.

"Those interactions with people who don't play a lot of videogames were some of the more rewarding"



The rock puzzle in the third chapter must have taken quite a while to assemble.
Yeah, that was the last puzzle added to the game, because there was another puzzle that was there instead and it was bothering me, so I ripped it out.

Why? Was it an issue of difficulty or did you remove it for narrative reasons?
Both. And it was too similar to other puzzles. There's an earlier puzzle with counterweights on a shelf and the puzzle that was replaced was a pulley with ropes and different weights, and it felt like it was getting too wonky. The rock puzzle in some ways is a very simple concept, but I wanted something that felt different – it's one of the only realtime puzzles in the game. But yeah, it took forever to make it work. Although the concept is simple, making all the pieces fit together, so the scenes that make up that sequence seem like they're a natural part of the world, but then also fit together and then give you clues, like with the coloured ribbons? Yeah. I thought that was a simple replacement to a complicated puzzle, and it turned out to be much harder to design.

Faith, or belief at least, is one of the underlying themes of the narrative. Is that something that's particularly important to you?
Well, certainly there are plenty of games with gods and spirits and fantasy religions, but this is more about the personal sensation of trying to maintain faith throughout a lifetime – like, what do you give up in that pursuit? It's coming from a place of wanting to believe in something that's outside the world, that there's more to the world than what we see in front of us, and that felt very personal, when I started the game. I'm not a specifically faithful person – I was raised Episcopalian, and I have a pretty ambiguous relationship to that now – but that's sort of what it's about. The basic need that religion was there to address. That need still exists.

What's next for you? Are you considering making another game?
Yes, I do want to make another game. In some ways I want the chance to learn from this. I feel like the design of this game was overencumbered, simply because of all the hand-drawn art and the way the pictures had to fit together; all the pieces were heavy to move around. I want a project where I have more lightness and freedom. And I also want to try and avoid the classic postpartum depression that developers can feel when they release a game – especially one you've been working on for over five years – by trying to build the ramp into the next project, so I have something to think about. ■

Never Stop Sneakin'

There are some people for whom stealth comes naturally; players who thrive when asked to stay incognito, flitting elegantly between safe spots while snapping necks like twigs, ghosting through enemy facilities like a true superspy. Then there are those who can't even hide in a cupboard properly, who spend five seconds planning and then an hour lying prone in the bushes waiting for alert timers to reset. *Never Stop Sneakin'* is pitched firmly at the latter camp, bringing the stealth-action power fantasy within easy reach of even the most cack-handed of players.

It does so by all but eradicating the threat of being spotted by automating everything except your character's movement. Get close to an entry or turret gun and it'll be instantly cut down in a single, automatically performed hit. If you're spotted by a grunt, our hero shoots them dead before they can raise the alarm. Stray into the detection range of a security camera or sentry turret and an EMP grenade will take it out, along with any others within range; if a combination of these should notice you at the same time, a smoke grenade puts them out of commission for just long enough for you to zip around and put them to the blade before retreating to safety. The result is a game that, menu selections aside, can be played with nothing more than a thumb resting on the left analogue stick.

It's also a game of thrilling pace, that lets you react to situations as they occur instead of demanding that you patiently plan ahead, like other stealth games. Most levels start with a guard blocking a hallway with its back to you, a coded message that tells you it's safe to simply charge forward. Levels are designed in such a way that you're rarely forced into hiding while you wait for a guard to turn around and head off; there's always an alternative route to take, preserving forward momentum, and chances are it'll be a worthy detour. Corridors and pathways are studded with collectables, like dots in a *Pac-Man* maze. Indeed, Toru Iwatani's classic is as obvious a touchstone for *Never Stop Sneakin'* as *Metal Gear Solid* and its ilk, a game in which you rarely stop moving and which rewards, even demands, that you pick every path clean, avoiding enemies until the moment you decide to send them to the afterlife.

These ones respawn, too, though not in quite the same way as *Pac-Man*'s ghosts. There's an almost Roguelike element to *Never Stop Sneakin'*'s structure, though its treatment of death is far more lenient. But you'll run and re-run the same gauntlet from the start each time; level and enemy layouts are subtly remixed occasionally, and at certain mission milestones the game extends, a new, three-level section being tacked on to the end. Occasionally you're set a specific objective – one that typically involves rescuing a prisoner from a side room, but often sends you looking for a certain object, though both play out in much the same way – but by and large you are there simply to work, to explore and to kill, hoovering up ESP, the currency that's found in small amounts underfoot and in big chunks from loot caches.

Developer/publisher Humble Hearts
Format Switch
Release Out now

It's a parody of one of gaming's most patient, ponderous genres that begs you onto the front foot



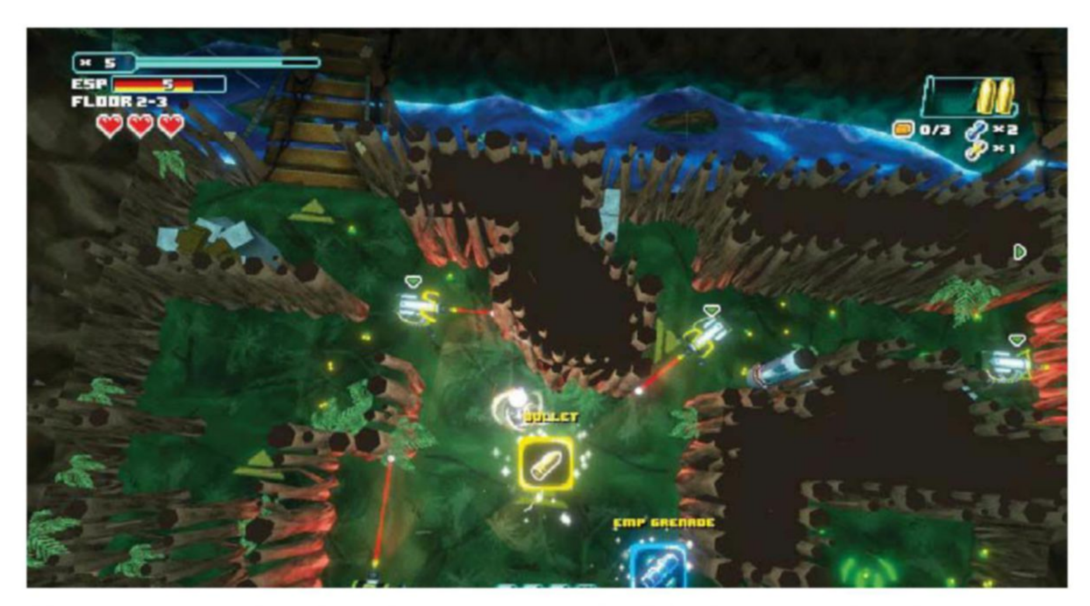
BIG BOSS
Every third level ends with a boss fight, and they're almost all pushovers – though they nonetheless offer Humble Hearts a rare opportunity to up the stakes. A helicopter that spits out bullet-hell-level volumes of ordnance must be dispatched by first picking up a randomly spawning rocket launcher, then standing still for long enough to line up an automated shot. Others must be stunned by hacking terminals to activate forcefields, or simply struck with your blade from cover, though you'll need to kite multiple enemies into hittable positions first. While fine pacing devices, they're not really needed in a game that goes out of its way to subvert genre convention. At least, like every other enemy encounter in the game, they're over quickly.

You spend ESP on expanding your home base as you bid to overthrow the antagonist, a pantomime villain who, the game has it, was president for a few minutes in 1945 after Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. Believing he missed the opportunity he deserved, he's travelled through time and kidnapped every president, and will only release them when he's reinstalled in the Oval Office. If that sounds silly then, yes, well done: this is a game that delights in its daftness. Your commanding officer is delighted, for instance, when you install running water in your underground base, because he's been living on a diet of pickle juice. He's similarly thrilled when our new communications tower enables him to retire his fleet of carrier pigeons ("Technology's getting better and better all the time! Meanwhile, pigeons become more and more useless"). The best gag is a visual one: this is a game built in 2017 to a 1998 aesthetic, with *Metal Gear Solid*'s low-res avatars and three-quarter perspective, and even the odd stylistic flourish, such as when characters are first introduced and their voice actor's name appears in brackets on screen. Tonally, it's a fine fit for the mechanical game, light-hearted, celebratory and thoroughly easy to love.

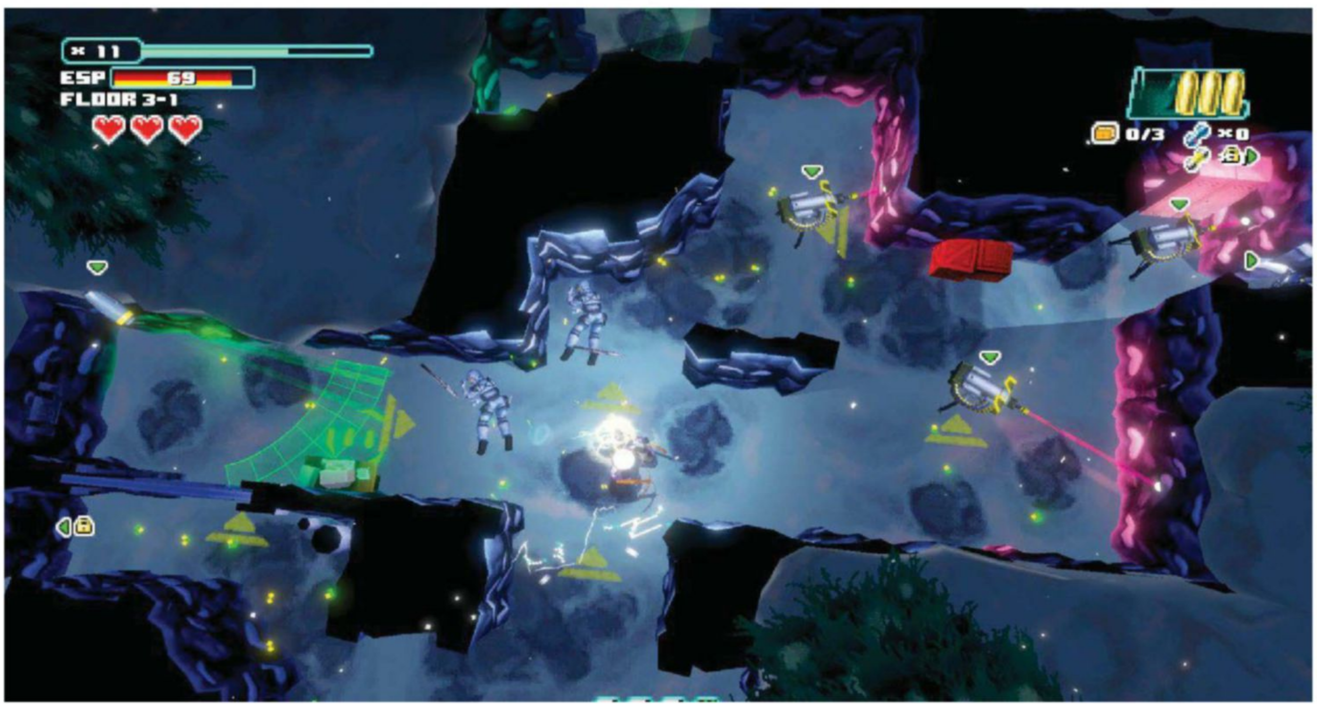
It can, despite that, be quite unsettling, especially early on – because you can't quite work out where a game that makes the player so powerful from the word go can possibly be headed. Difficulty is an alien concept here, and while the threat does ramp up, requiring you to finally make use of your limited inventory of bullets, smoke and EMP grenades, failure is still rare indeed. Then you start to appreciate the intricacies of the scoring system: the way a clean kill builds a multiplier that slowly ticks down, requiring that you balance out kills with detours to hoover up currency. Suddenly *Never Stop Sneakin'* kicks into a higher gear, your approach changing again, understanding that it's not just about being strong; you also need to be fast, and efficient.

The result is a quiet triumph. Developer Dean Dodrill's debut game, *Dust: An Elysian Tail*, was a deep brawler-cum-Metroidvania with a divisive aesthetic, but he has followed it up with a game of cheery inclusivity, a parody of one of gaming's most patient, ponderous genres that begs you to get onto the front foot and lavishly rewards you for doing so. It's subversive, and silly, but never less than a thrill, a game that shows stealth doesn't have to make you feel bad for getting it wrong. It can wave it away with an automatic kill, then nudge you forward with a combo timer. It's a game where stealth comes naturally for absolutely everyone, and is all the better for it.

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LEFT Sentries turn through 360 degrees, a quarter-circle at a time. Like most of this game's supposed threats, they're no trouble at all. **MAIN** Things certainly get a little busier in later levels, but we only die a handful of times during our time with *Never Stop Sneakin'*. **BOTTOM** If you're in a hurry you can simply ignore much of the level, but loot-cache collectables can hugely boost your ESP earnings





ABOVE Antagonist Amadeus Guildenstern pops up to tease you at regular intervals. His time machine is the MacGuffin that justifies your need to start every mission from level 1-1, since he rewinds and resets everything



Destiny 2: Curse Of Osiris

This was never going to be the moment that *Destiny 2* clicked into place. Work on *Curse Of Osiris* was well underway when we visited Bungie for **E**310's cover story, and so it had no chance of fixing the problems that have only come to light since the base game's release. It is still too focused on cosmetics you can only acquire through RNG. It still lacks a meaningful endgame. And too many of its additions are things that have either been restored from *Destiny 1*, or should have been part of *Destiny 2* from the start.

Bungie sold us on the need for a sequel to *Destiny*, rather than another expansion to it, by extolling the virtues of hitting the reset button on a series that had grown bloated and overly complex. That, no doubt, was truly felt. Yet it has also given the studio the excuse to sell back to players features that came as standard in the original *Destiny*. While it's nice to have Heroic Strikes – amped-up versions of the game's signature missions, that theoretically yield stronger rewards – back on the menu, where were they three months earlier when we needed them, when *Destiny 2*'s endgame fizzled out?

This update also adds Heroic versions of the Adventure sidequests, but only on the new DLC destination, Mercury. They're tightly designed, pose a stern challenge, and offer great satisfaction when you finally clear them. Bungie, apparently, is working on equivalents for the other stops on *Destiny 2*'s intergalactic journey. We simply cannot understand why they were not factored in from the start.

Mercury itself, meanwhile, is tiny, a sun-parched, circular map hosting a single Public Event and very little besides. While it branches off to other areas during certain missions, none is accessible in open play; like the gorgeous New Pacific Arcology in the base game's Titan moon, these new areas are disappointingly underused. Nowhere is that more true than the Infinite Forest, an area about which Bungie made great hay in the run-up to *Curse Of Osiris'* release. Pitched as an ever-changing, endless battleground, it is in practice a sort of procedurally generated loading screen, linking the Mercury hub to its various spokes with a series of randomised firefights. Again, there's an opportunity here: for a steadily more difficult randomised horde mode, perhaps, that spits out better loot the further into it you get. Instead, it pops up for a few minutes during story missions and Adventures, and you quickly realise that you can simply sprint past most encounters without firing a bullet. Soon, it might as well not be there at all.

The campaign itself is nice enough, a three-hour romp around the solar system as you seek to free legendary warlock Osiris. At its best – during the thrilling final-boss battle, for instance – it is better than the main *Destiny 2* campaign. At its worst, it brazenly recycles elements of the base game, the nadir coming when it has you run through a Strike mission room by room and drops a different boss at the end. The expansion returns the favour later on, when one of the new campaign missions is retooled as a new Strike, but that doesn't exactly make it okay. The last thing *Destiny 2* needed was a perception of corners being cut.

After the campaign come the Adventures, which you're necessarily instructed to run through one after the other, because that's really about it for *Curse Of Osiris*. Complete those, and a Heroic variant, and you're introduced to weapon forging. Each of the 11 weapons on offer requires a lengthy quest to collect tens of new materials which have a chance of dropping when you complete various activities. All of which means Bungie's first order of business is to send you out into the solar system to grind Public Events. Short, fun and lucrative, these ad-hoc planetary firefights were the quickest, most efficient source of XP and loot in the base game; to put it another way, we're thoroughly sick of them, and being sent back to them so quickly feels like a studio holding its hands up and admitting it has nothing left to offer us. In fact, it does: other forging quests require you to complete Heroic Strikes or Crucible matches, but Bungie, for some reason, decides to first send everyone back to a place they already know too well.

If all this feels like a studio that still, somehow, doesn't quite understand what *Destiny* means to its players, there are a couple of glimmers of hope. Instead of an all-new raid, *Curse Of Osiris* introduces the concept of the 'raid lair'; set on the same colossal spaceship as the base game's Leviathan raid, Eater Of Worlds is a shorter, but no less challenging, activity. It feels like a realistic halfway house between the work a full raid requires, and simply doing nothing at all. It's beautiful, too, and there's a welcome emphasis on platforming, even during combat. Of course the rewards are terrible, but you can't have it all.

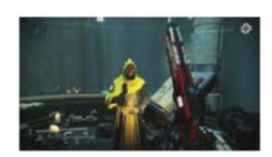
The new Masterwork weapon tier, however, patched in a week after launch, finally gives endgame players something truly worth chasing. As a more powerful variant of legendary weapons, they make every drop exciting again, and while RNG rates are low, when one comes, it's well worth it, with a minor stat boost and a game-changing orb-creation element that lets you refill not only your allies' Super meters, but your own, too.

It is here that we find hope. Masterworks could, and certainly should, be expanded to other gear types, leading us back to the sort of min/max endgame that made *Destiny* so intoxicating. Bungie has said it is going to change, and will communicate more. Yet we learned long ago to judge this studio on its actions, rather than its words. It still has much to do. But for the first time in a while, *Destiny 2* players have finally been given something to be positive about.

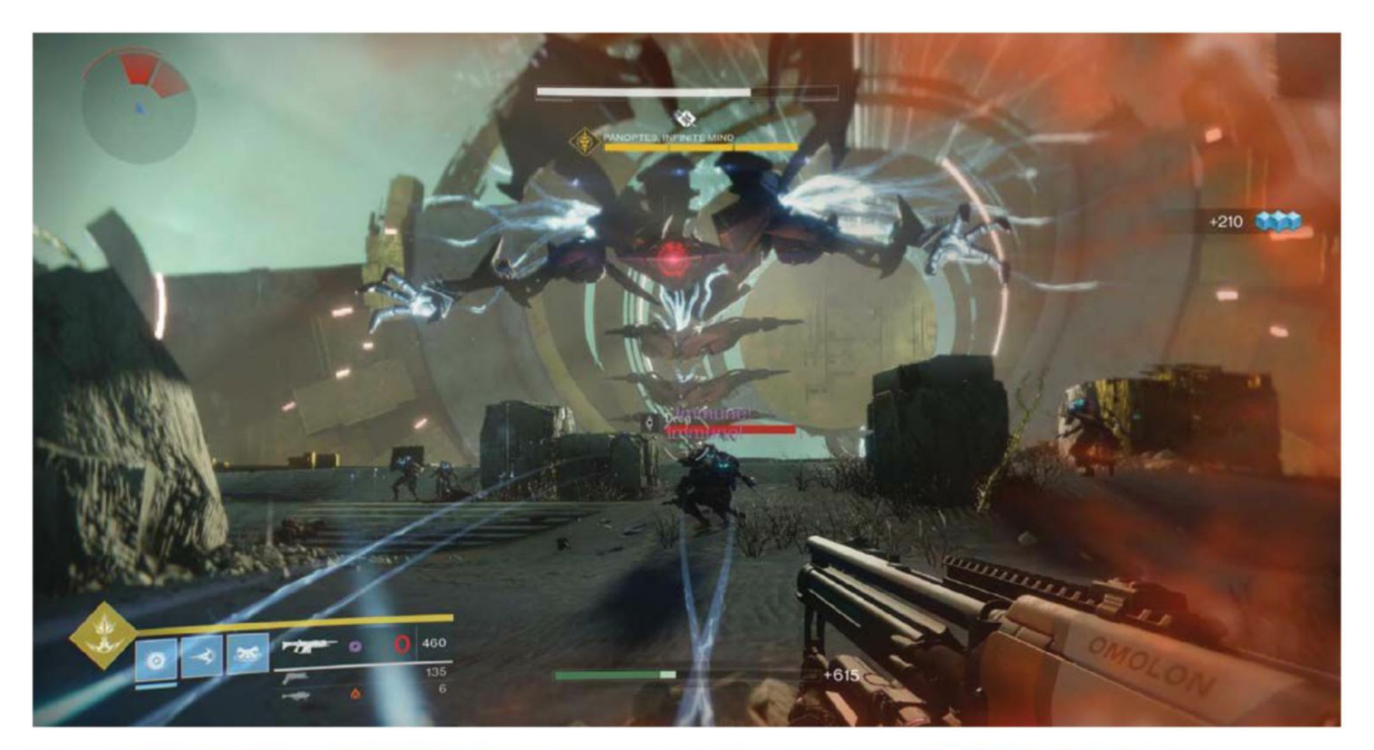
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Developer Bungie
Publisher Activision
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

It is still too focused on cosmetics you can only acquire through RNG, and still lacks a meaningful endgame



LENS OF TRUTH
Curse Of Osiris doesn't add much new exotic gear, and much of what it does introduce is recycled from the original *Destiny*. That makes it hard to understand how one of the few new guns shipped with a truly game-breaking bug. The Prometheus Lens quickly came to dominate in the Crucible, where it could kill a player in a fraction of a second. Bungie said it was an error that would be patched a week after launch. Xur, the travelling weekend merchant, magically had it in his inventory; suddenly, every player could get their hands on it. For a weekend, Crucible was ridiculous, in a wonderful way, with hordes of players logging on to use their brilliantly broken new toy – leading cynics to wonder whether that wasn't the plan all along.

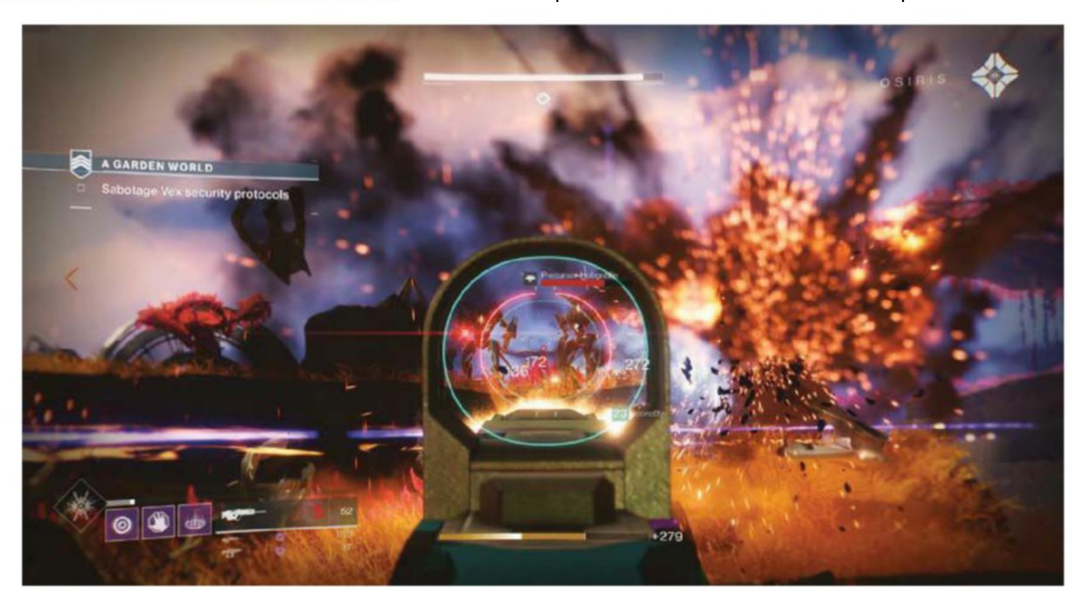






ABOVE The return of the Vex is welcome indeed after three months of primarily fighting Cabal, though the latter still makes its presence felt, often when least expected. This Vex boss will soon wish it had looked up

TOP The final battle is nicely done, and certainly has the beating of its equivalent in the base game. Unusually for a *Destiny* boss fight, however, it's heavily scripted. ABOVE The expansion brings with it a host of new cosmetic items such as ships, sparrows and shaders, but around half of all the new items are locked away inside loot boxes. RIGHT An already handsome game becomes an outrageously pretty one with the addition of HDR. Somehow Bungie managed to mess it up at launch on PS4, giving Xbox owners a long-overdue exclusive until it was patched a week later



Battle Chef Brigade

You don't always need the most exotic ingredients to prepare a good meal. The competitive cook-offs in *Battle Chef Brigade* blend an unremarkable platform brawler with a straightforward match-three puzzler, while an episodic narrative binds it all together. Yet the simplicity of the raw components belies a dish of piquant flavour, these individual elements cohering into something that, while admittedly slight in form, collectively produce a satisfying dish.

It's beautifully presented, too, with its hand-drawn characters and watercolour backdrops lending the serenely whimsical world of Victusia a distinctly Miyazaki-esque feel. In fact, the whole game is suffused with a Ghibli-like warmth: not all the rivalries between protagonist Mina and her fellow chefs are friendly, but it captures the unique camaraderie that can emerge from good-natured competition. In other words, it's closer to The Great British Bake-Off than Chopped – and even a conspiracy plot that's bubbling away in the background has the kind of low-stakes feel of a lightweight Sunday-teatime drama. You might be dealing with elves, orcs and necromancers, but each of the chefs feels relatably human; their designs may be lightly sketched, but their characterisation is anything but.

It does, however, mean that dialogue and plot can take over for long spells. At times, the cooking battles between those hoping to earn a place in the eponymous brigade can feel more like a side plate than the main course. Each of these is set against the clock, as you're invited to produce dishes to satisfy a judging panel. Your score is dependent on the quality of your ingredients, and how closely you adhere to their demands.

Most judges will ask for a recipe with a predominant elemental flavour, though some will ask you to balance two of them – and there's a special ingredient that it's imperative you include in each serving. It isn't enough simply to complete the dishes: you'll need to plate up and present them to the panel before time runs out.

The foraging part is simple enough. Dash out of the kitchen and you'll find plenty of local flora and fauna to harvest: everything from carnivorous plants to vicious little fuzzballs that barrel out of their nests, and even ponderous but powerful dragons. There's a subtle sense of a wider monster ecosystem, though this basically amounts to birds flying off with monster parts to gulp them down and excrete eggs – which in turn can be struck to make a sauce. You've got a set of knives with which to attack beasts from close range, though you can also spend your limited supply of mana points lobbing them from a safer distance, or producing whirlwinds to buffet airborne pests. With your satchel stuffed, you'll return to your pantry for the second part of the process.

Appropriately, cooking is an enjoyable and moderately stressful process. Each ingredient is represented by an arrangement of coloured orbs that you drop into a 4x4 puzzle grid. Using up to three pans, you must combine them, 'stirring' the pot by rotating square blocks of four. Match three like-coloured orbs and they'll create a more potent fusion, boosting the score of the recipe. Three of those will, in turn, produce a high-quality ingredient that will remain in the dish. As valuable as these are, they also take up room in your pan, and space quickly becomes a concern – not least when you've got pieces of bone to complicate matters (though these, too, can be arranged to form a wildcard orb that can make matches with any colour). Poisoned monster parts are more of a problem, steadily reducing the quality of adjacent orbs, though they can also be used to make room: getting rid of an unwanted earthy residue, say, when your panel's after a dish with a kick.

In the meantime, you can complete side missions. Puzzle stages challenge you to make a recipe from provided ingredients to earn a set number of points. On hunts you can practise your stomps, uppercuts and backstabs until you've slain the requisite number of beasts. But the busy restaurant quests are the best, inviting you to fulfil several orders arriving in rapid succession, with customers requesting specific orb patterns in their dishes. They're easily passed, in truth, but the challenge lies in completing as many as you can to earn better tips. These and other cash rewards can be spent in shops to give you a fighting chance in upcoming rounds. Bonus ingredients give you a head start, while special pans let you produce matches from pairs rather than threes, albeit only for a single element type, forcing you to keep switching pans.

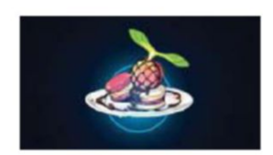
Despite the abstract presentation of the ingredients and the process, there are moments where it feels awfully like the real thing. Certainly, if you've ever had to cater for guests, you'll recognise the panic in juggling several dishes at once, seemingly never quite having enough room. In a broader sense, it's about finding the right balance between quality and consistency: do you go all out on one show-stopper and hope the bonuses will cover the weaknesses of your second, or aim for two solid but unspectacular dishes? On the relatively easygoing Normal difficulty you'll be able to get away with a few minor mistakes, but on Hard mode your time management needs to be much more efficient. At least you never have to worry about anything boiling over or burning, but then we've never had to slaughter a wyvern before serving up a roast.

Outside the competition there's not quite enough to sink your teeth into, and after a while you might well find yourself thumbing the skip button during dialogue sections to get back to the action. It's insubstantial but sweet, then; Trinket Studio's game may not linger long on the palate, but while it lasts, this delicate confection leaves a pleasant taste indeed.

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Developer Trinket Studios
Publisher Adult Swim Games
Format PC, Switch (tested)
Release Out now

The busy restaurant quests are best, inviting you to fulfil several orders arriving in rapid succession

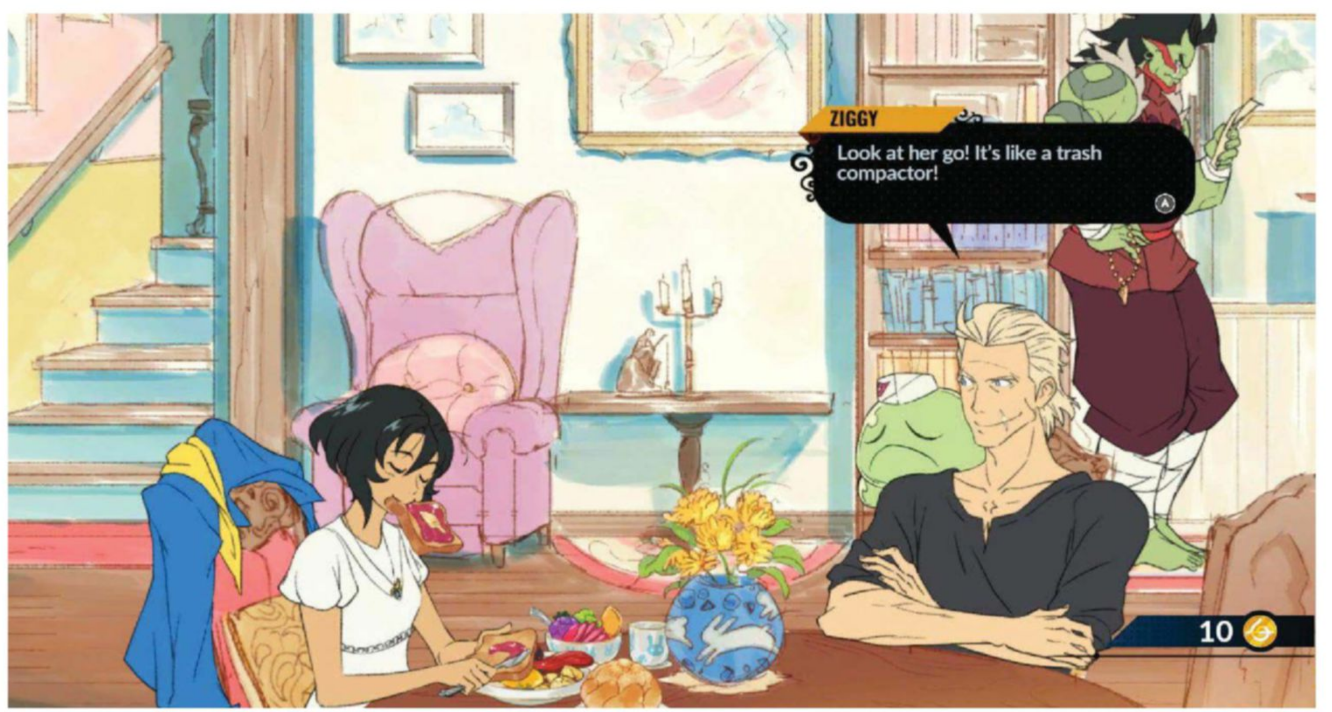


LEFTOVERS
You'll realise just how narrative-heavy the game is on a Hard playthrough, but if you'd rather get straight down to business there are a few options besides a replay. Two challenge modes pit you against other online players: Restaurant Rush is all about completing as many orders as you can in three minutes, while Break The Dishes offers a half-hearted reminder of the *Smash Bros* series' target-smashing mode. Much better is the Daily Cook-Off, which challenges Mina or her orc colleague Thrash to complete recipes with a prescribed loadout. The leaderboards would seem to suggest our time-management skills need a bit of work – nothing new there – but all the same it's an absorbing test of the culinary techniques you've picked up.





ABOVE Judges can seem rather picky in their comments, but sometimes it pays to keep things on the simple side and stick to their requirements rather than overelaborate and end up with an unbalanced dish





TOP Ah, sweet victory. The results screen highlights the broad variety of possible recipes, the dish you present depending on both the ingredients you brought into the kitchen and the order you used them. **MAIN** If the conversations seem to drag on occasion, that's partly because their presentation is a little static. Still, the quality of the script compensates somewhat. **RIGHT** On most days you have a choice of opponent, and the prizes you earn can have a significant impact on your approach to subsequent rounds

Monster Of The Deep: Final Fantasy XV

With every other genre in existence exploited, only fishing remains. While there's at least something worth admiring about Square Enix's ongoing mission to spin *FFXV* out into seemingly every game type in existence – expansions to the base game have added thirdperson shooter, driving and multiplayer dungeon-crawling modes – *Monster Of The Deep* shows that sometimes you should just stick to what you know best.

For a start, this is one of the ugliest games on PSVR. It's not for want of trying; rather, the problem is that Square Enix seems to have ignored the need to lower your ambitions when making games for a technology that has to render each scene twice, once for each eye. While some environments look OK, others are blocky in the extreme, and the screen-door effect is worse here than we've seen anywhere else on PSVR.

The fishing itself works well enough – flicks of one Move controller fling the line in your right hand, while your left works the reel. At first, you must catch fish to fill a meter; the bigger the catch, the greater the payoff. Once it's full, a huge daemon fish emerges, and the rod in your right hand is replaced by a crossbow. Learn its attacks (some charge you; others fire projectiles; one clones itself, and only a shot at the 'correct' one will damage it), whittle down its health bar then, at the end, reel it in.

Those are the basics, and are enjoyable enough, but nothing more. Square Enix expands – well, pads out – the core action with free-mode and tournament angling, a home base with access to a shop that lets you buy stronger rods and lures for specific catches, and cameos aplently from Noctis and the gang. The prince himself is a keen angler and Prompto's there for the photos, while Gladiolus insists he's all about communing with nature, man. While extra fishing modes are meant to drive replay value, the rest of it is pure fan-service set dressing – something that's made uncomfortably clear when another familiar face turns up (see 'Tactics ogle').

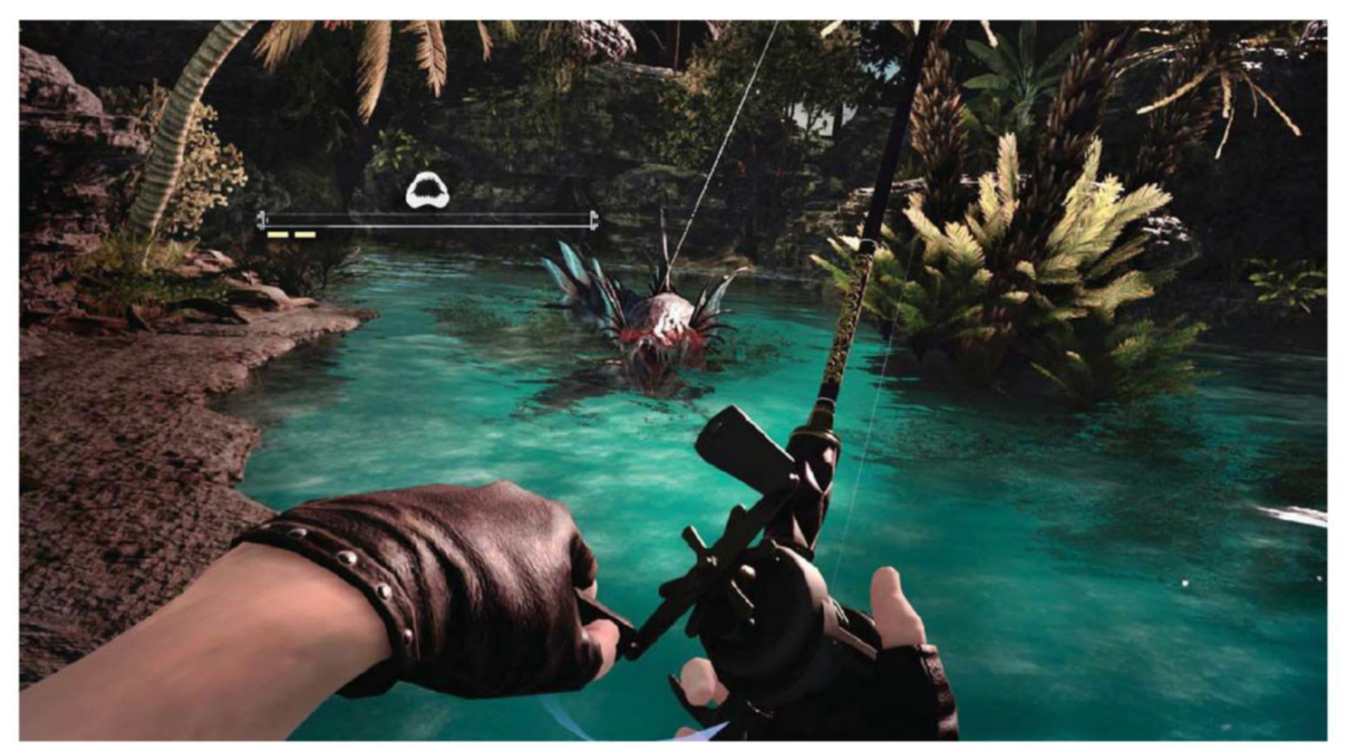
It's all a little rote – something we certainly don't associate with *Final Fantasy*. And it's a glitchy old thing too, with persistent tracking issues even when you're seated. You'll suddenly find yourself sat four feet behind your headless in-game torso, arms flailing around at horror-movie angles. The UI frequently gets in the way of the action, while if you play with subtitles, they'll often appear so close to you that you have to move back in order to read them – once again exposing your headless cadaver. After this was announced at E3, we re-christened it *Final Fantasy Batshit Fishing*. It turns out that was one syllable too many.

4

Developer/publisher Square Enix
Format PSVR
Release Out now



TACTICS OGLE
You'd be forgiven for wondering why a VR *FFXV* spin-off exists – but all is made clear with Cindy, the buxom, scantily clad car mechanic, turns up. She'll arrive periodically to fix your car, which you mysteriously park in your living room, even though it seems to run just fine. Handily, she's coded to remain within specific viewing (OK, perving) distance; when we get in our car earlier than expected she spawns just outside the driver's side door, bent over, hands on her ankles, intently inspecting a chest of drawers.



While there's little drama to the process of reeling in a daemon – you've done the hard work, they're stunned, and don't fight back – you can lose a smaller catch if you don't pay attention to UI prompts while you work

Superflight

Superflight's developers are all too aware of the perceived shortfalls of their wingsuit simulator. In fact, the game's Steam page lists everything it lacks. "This game doesn't have," it announces, "helicopters, guns, a soundtrack, a leveling system, a cinematic story, Twitch live integration or loot boxes." To which we say – thank christ.

Free from the trappings of most modern fare, then, *Superflight* is a refreshingly minimalist, score-chasing flight sim that enthralls through an uncannily accurate recreation of the sensation of speed. Start a run, and you're spawned into a procedurally generated chunk of sky, near huge rock formations. The rush of the fall is instant and pure, only the wind whipping around your blocky form offering the convincing illusion that you are indeed going very, very fast – no thumping electro required. Twitchy controls mean even tiny tilts see you sailing off in wide arcs, sometimes battling the breeze, while leaning forward slightly sends you hurtling downward even faster to stomach-flipping effect.

The quicker you plummet, the twitchier movement gets – and the closer you fly to rocks, the more points you rack up. Skimming over a surface has your score climb at a pleasant rate. Spot a gap or a cave, however, and a successful flight through will boost it by thousands. In the absence of levelling, progress comes from acclimatisation to purposefully fussy controls – and the bets you make with yourself upon seeing a particular set of metaphorical monkey bars in the rocky playgrounds, resetting levels until you manage to whizz through the fissure unscathed.

Once you're off, the terse thrill of maintaining momentum for as long as possible kicks in. Combos continue if you keep scoring in quick succession. Here, audio cues come into their own: fly away from danger for a breather, and a cosmic cash register somewhere ka-chings as points are banked. Crash, and the wind in your ears disappears alongside a blink-inducing (and rather funny) crunch. End of combo.

And you're back, dropping through clouds below or dipping through portals to spawn somewhere else in the hopes of an easier time, or more points potential, or simply a fresh view. Chaining together these changes of scenery is both tactical and vaguely narratively satisfying – the seamless, shifting journey of every flight dream you've ever had. It feels strangely personal, in that regard: an experience that, were we the streaming sort, we'd be reticent to share on Twitch.

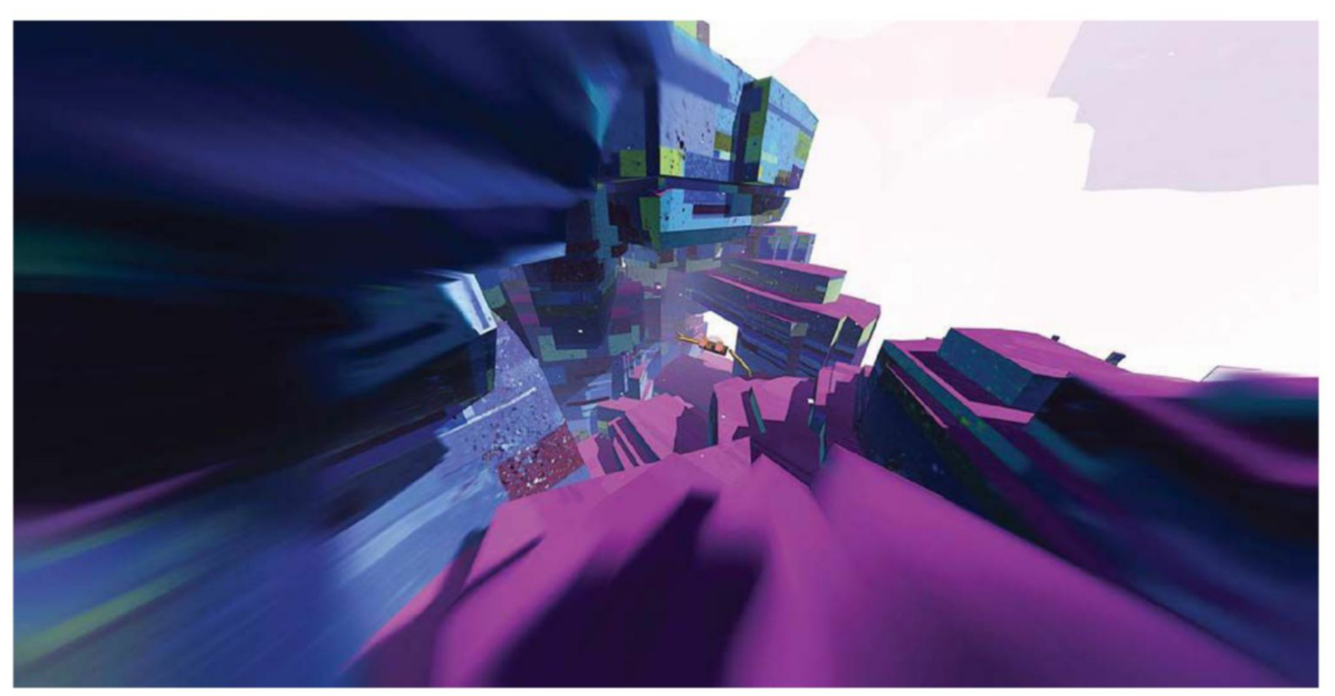
All told, it's a slight, essentially basic little game. We doubt it will begrudge us a score which takes that into consideration: indeed, its humble entry fee says plenty. But in a market of excess, of bombast and loot boxes – often, at the expense of actual fun – this joyous, remarkably accomplished expression of the ultimate fantasy provides some welcome relief. **7**

Developer/publisher Grizzly Games
Format PC
Release Out now



BESPOKE SEEDS EVERY DAY
As in the likes of *Minecraft*, *Superflight*'s home menu lets players enter a 'seed' – whether a string of numbers or a word – to generate particular maps. This makes it easy to share your most unusual or challenging finds: there are a few forum threads dedicated to seed-swapping. Our favourite recommendation so far is 'DankAF', whose striking 45-degree rock chunks provide both gorgeous and dangerous flight paths. 'Edge', sadly, isn't a looker, though its well-spaced brown pillars do make it a serviceable beginners' map.

Although perhaps not as striking as they could be, there are subtle weather effects and level furniture in *Superflight*'s levels: sprinklings of snow, or fluffy neon trees, that add signs of life to your lonely airborne sojourns



Ode

A plump little creature encased within a translucent ball sets off on a pressure-free, challenge-light musical journey. It might sound punishingly twee, but *Ode* is, well, a joy: the kind of game you'd get if you spliced *Grow Home* and *Electroplankton* – or, perhaps, *Super Monkey Ball* if it was remade by Björk. With hints of *Katamari Damacy*, too, Ubisoft Reflections' latest experiment is a splendidly bouncy and tactile celebration of sound.

You'll roll through tunnels and caves of dark, glittering rock, with lightly percussive thumps accompanying each bounce. Bulbous protrusions will rise up from the ground as you tumble past, bumping you along and producing musical notes. You'll stumble into other unearthly lifeforms: collide with a cluster of purple polyps and you'll hear the hiss of a hi-hat, while writhing nozzles spray out motes of light, as if you'd disturbed a nest of fireflies. Fungal growths sway, pulse and undulate, some sucking you toward them, others blowing you up and out. Then there are larger green growths that lean in as you approach, turning orange when touched; activate all these within the local area, and a central mass will burst open, releasing ribbons of light that dart outward. The soundtrack that has been building almost imperceptibly since the start becomes louder, gaining another layer of instrumentation, and you realise that your every action has been contributing to this strange, alien performance.

Meanwhile, spherical star pieces act as both a breadcrumb trail and a collectable of sorts, subtly guiding you while attaching themselves like limpets. They're easier to shake off, mind: the left trigger casts them out, with the right calling them back and corralling them into a tight circle. You'll need them for some light environmental puzzles, throwing them at green nodes that retreat if you get too close. Colourful pools prompt various transformations, affording you new ways to explore and make noise across these four large worlds. Perhaps the best of these turns you into a kind of treacly Slinky, as you slurp your way up rocky steps.

On occasion, *Ode* can be slightly fiddly, with an inconsistent jump causing a few unwanted falls, though with no time pressure it hardly matters. Otherwise, you'll feel a sense of satisfaction that's reminiscent of *Okami*, in that your very presence is helping bring a quiet world to bright, flourishing life. That gently euphoric feeling crescendos at the end of each stage as you ascend to the skies; there's no post-game results screen to tell you how many orbs you found or how long you took, but none is needed. In every sense, the pleasure here is in the playing.

8

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Reflections)
Format PC
Release Out now



JINGLE BALLS
There's a festive surprise for finishing the game in the form of a Christmas-themed stage which, in stark contrast to the rest of the game, demands you collect as many celestial spheres as you can, while introducing the mild pressure of a ticking timer. With just 90 seconds on the clock, you'll need to seek out orb clusters and gift-wrapped packages that yield more still – all while ensuring you avoid the Grinch-like blobs who'll deplete your supply if you get too close.

Other objects will sporadically hitch a ride: some parp out notes, while a bomb of sorts releases a bassy pulse which sends your collected star bits scattering all over the place. Still, retrieving them is really no bother at all



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Mafia: The City Of Lost Heaven

The Cosa Nostra caper that subverted the Rockstar blueprint

By Phil Iwaniuk

Developer Illusion Softworks **Publisher** Gathering Of Developers **Format** PC, PS2, Xbox **Release** 2002

Back in 2001, *Grand Theft Auto III* gave players their first taste of the freedom 3D open-world games could offer, and it also laid out a design blueprint that developers are still iterating on nearly two decades later. It was a bullish production that seemed destined to dictate the direction of the entire industry in its wake, such was the glut of artless simulacra that followed. Over in Brno, though, they weren't having it. Illusion Softworks had made its name with the wildly ambitious WWII action-strategy hybrid *Hidden & Dangerous* in 1999, and a year after *GTAIII*'s release it offered a dissenting voice on what gaming's newfound expanses could be used for with *Mafia: The City Of Lost Heaven*. Like Liberty City, the game's setting of Lost Heaven is a collage of familiar east coast bridges and skyscrapers, but it resolutely isn't a playground bristling with distractions. Instead, Illusion built an enormous movie set alive with 1930s atmosphere which offered almost no diversions outside the main questline, and which hosted a straight-faced homage to mobster movies past and present.

The latter is no small detail. Even in the early 2000s, very few games dared to look beyond Aliens and Black Hawk Down for inspiration from the wider world of pop culture. The simple fact that *Mafia* has its eyes further afield, on the kind of movies in which you might see people kiss friends on the lips with menace or chop garlic with a razor blade, says a lot about its ambition. In fact it rattles off cinematic references like Tommy Gun fire before even handing control over to the player. Protagonist Tommy Angelo is introduced as a crisp-suited Mafioso snitch offering information to an FBI agent in a smoky pre-war cafe, setting up a central plot conceit that mirrors Henry Hill's reflective narration in Goodfellas. Then, just as the two are settling into their seats, the game jumps back almost a decade to 1930, to the point when Angelo is first seduced by the power and riches of the wiseguy life.

Mafia is very deliberate about presenting these two contrasting versions of the central character in this order. It wants you to understand how one likeable blue-collar man could become the criminal and disloyal other, and in order to do so it shows you a deliberately dull insight into Angelo's pre-Mafia life. Before made men Paulie and Sam happen to jump in his cab one evening, his is a life of short instructions from impatient strangers, and repetitive journeys between New Heaven's boroughs. You know this because you've experienced it firsthand in the game's second mission, which plays out like a version of *Crazy Taxi* restricted to 25mph. By first establishing a workaday world and forcing you to operate within its constraints, *Mafia* sets up a later payoff when you get the chance to break free of them, but it also generates plenty of empathy for Angelo and his ultimately questionable life decisions. Would you rather spend the rest of the game ferrying people from point to point on the map, or pulling off nefarious jobs to a score of gunfire, police whistles and jazz clarinet? Well, quite. Angelo concurs.

When he enters the Salieri bar to take Paulie and Sam up on their offer of work, Angelo permanently crosses a threshold into a life of crime. Still, it's the thin end of the wedge for those first few missions as Salieri assesses how much use this new footsoldier can be. Just as it did in the deliberately pedestrian opening missions, *Mafia* finds weight in the small-scale criminal activities of Angelo's first jobs. One such venture is a petty revenge mission which tasks you with sneaking into a car park and smashing up the vehicles within it. The cars belong to the very same goons you saved Paulie and Sam from in the first mission, and who later caught up with you alone, chasing you through the back alleys of Central Island, their bullets whistling by the washing lines to a musical backdrop of Tarantella tunes. There's no shortage of motivation, then, when given a baseball bat and a Molotov cocktail and told to work the cars over. It might be small-time thuggery, but it's thuggery to savour.

The ante is, of course, upped throughout the course of Angelo's story so that enormous shootouts with the police eventually become commonplace, but the journey from normality to that point is unusually patient and restrained for the ▶

era. Along the way *Mafia* introduces many bold and ambitious ideas, sometimes with bespoke mechanics to facilitate them but usually without. One such moment is the walk home with love interest Sarah. It's a dramatic change of pace after the car chases and shootouts that precede it, and a laudable attempt to flesh out Angelo's character without wrenching away control of him. In reality, Sarah walks much slower than Angelo is able to and the uneventful stroll (and series of short sprints) feels mechanically awkward, so *Mafia* asks you to meet it halfway, calling in a few favours from the motivation and context it's worked so hard to generate up to that point. The same's true of A Trip To The Country, a smuggling run gone wrong in which crates must laboriously be loaded onto a truck (a motif the sequel would revisit to better effect) before that truck becomes a driveable health bar, depleted at an alarming rate by enemy mobsters. The absence of bespoke mechanics or animations to convey the particulars of your actions in this mission makes it feel like a chore – until *Mafia* wins you over again with the incidental details on its streets, the songs on your radio, and the patter between Angelo, Paulie and Sam.

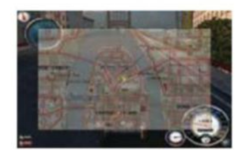
The story can't be pulled in different directions by the player. It's firmly about Angelo and the way he decides to navigate mob life, where to place his loyalty and where to suppress that loyalty in order to make a buck. Being locked onto the narrative rails at Angelo's behest never proves frustrating, though, because *Mafia* is constantly working to keep you in his mindset. Early on, it instils a fierce dislike of the police in you that's necessary for you to identify with your character later on. Running over multiple pedestrians might nudge the Liberty City PD out of their slumber long enough to raise a one-star wanted rating in *GTA III*, but in *Mafia* exceeding 40mph is enough to incur the full force of the law. Most cars take upwards of ten seconds to reach those breakneck speeds, mind you. Initially speeding is simply a ticketable offense, so pulling over and standing there while a cop gesticulates for a few seconds is enough to make it go away. But missions are often put under tight time constraints (which is why you were probably speeding in the first place) so your natural inclination is to flee, rather than take the ticking off. Doing so almost invariably ends with police cars boxing in your smoking, punctured write-off of an escape car, and the failure of your current mission. It doesn't take many of these incidents before the player sees the police through the eyes of an embittered career criminal.

Similar guile is employed when you willingly go against Don Salieri's orders, setting in motion a string of double-crosses and assassinations that no mob narrative should be without. A call girl at a nearby hotel has been whispering some Salieri

IT INSTILS A FIERCE DISLIKE OF THE POLICE IN YOU THAT'S NECESSARY FOR YOU TO IDENTIFY WITH YOUR CHARACTER



Evading the law never tasted sweeter than in the moment those train doors close, leaving pursuers furious and helpess on the platform. Never scripted, these moments relied on chance



Mafia works hard in its early missions to acquaint you with the city's boroughs and etch regular routes into your mind



DEATH RACE 2002

Mafia's defined by the swathes of ambitious ideas within it, and by the scattershot approach to their execution. One particular mission has become a talisman for this, and unfortunately it was a sticking point for many players at the time. Fairplay requires Tommy to replace a racing driver at the local track and win what's now gone down in history as gaming's hardest race. Legend has it that Illusion's entire testing team used racing wheels for that mission, but whatever misjudgements led to the game shipping in the state it did, the end result was almost impossible vehicle control. Later patches introduced radically lower difficulty options for this race, and even the option to skip it entirely. Today it exists as a cautionary tale for producers to whisper at designers.



Patrol cars are easily spotted, but lone walking officers are not. They will catch you speeding, they will inconvenience you, and they will instil hatred

trade secrets in the ears of her clients, and when the hit's put out on her it's Angelo who arrives at the front desk with murder on his mind. But when Angelo learns that the woman he's there to kill is his wife's friend Michelle, he can't go through with it. Neither, one can only hope, would most players when confronted with a sex worker in a bathtub pleading for their life. There's no agency in this decision, but at the same time you feel as though you've made it *with* Angelo, not that he's simply dragged you round by the sleeve while he conducts his affairs.

This process of hardening the player into the criminal, occurring so gradually you barely notice it, moves in tandem with a visible passage of time in Lost Heaven. From opening monologue to credits, 21 years pass by in the city, the cars gradually becoming sleeker and more powerful, the radio transitioning from instrumental jazz and big bands to crooning vocalists. *Mafia II* would employ the time jump much more dramatically in 2010, when Vito Scaletta was imprisoned in post-war America and subsequently released in the swinging '60s, but even this initial attempt at simulating the passage of time across an entire city and culture in 2002 is striking. Illusion was clearly enamoured with the many fictional automobiles it designed to create this effect – so much so that they all exist in a 'Carcyclopaedia' in the main menu, where their chrome details can be enjoyed in a virtual showroom.

Broadly, the industry chose *Grand Theft Auto III*'s interpretation of open-world criminality over *Mafia*'s for its template throughout the 2000s and beyond. And as *Mafia*'s sequel stuck resolutely to the idea of a city as a piece of elaborate set design, it attracted plenty of criticism for its linearity. Despite the volume of those criticisms, and the wildly different fortunes of the two series, the original *Mafia* still stands proud. When the backlash against 'See that mountain on the horizon?' game design began, the pushback against janitorial duties on an island full of map markers, the veterans at Illusion Softworks (rebranded 2K Czech in 2008) must have allowed themselves a wry smile. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it believe in the journey by simply placing an icon on a map. ■

Tommy tells his life story to the FBI via an absolute feast of mob-movie platitudes





A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Overwatch

Developer/publisher Blizzard Entertainment **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2016

Who makes *Overwatch*? Officially, it's the company behind *World Of Warcraft*, *Diablo* and *Heroes Of The Storm*; the team behind failed massively multiplayer online project *Titan*. Some might (wrongly) attribute it all to Jeff Kaplan, now the face of Blizzard's phenomenally successful shooter. But there's another far more significant, more complicated answer to the question: the players.

A candy-coloured cast of heroes such as time-travelling mascot Tracer and gorilla scientist Winston drew people in. The game kept them there. The 6v6 team shootouts with crunchy shotguns, high-powered lasers and MOBA-esque abilities set *Overwatch* up as the successor to Valve's *Team Fortress 2*. Thirty-five million players later, it's a sensation. With just the right amount of leeway on shots, *Overwatch* is instantly fun to play, but it's the ability to switch the character you're playing whenever you respawn that eventually makes it a game of careful timing, teamwork and tactical acquiescence over perfect headshots.

Get steamrolled by the opposition's strong team and you counter it with a game-changing move – here meaning an apt choice of hero, rather than a no-scope shot. And Blizzard's continued support of the game means *Overwatch* is constantly in flux, creating fresh puzzles to solve. When sniper-healer Ana was added last year, the triple-tank meta reigned, while this year's arrival of safety robot Orisa made the battlefield a maze of shields to exploit or circumnavigate. Return after a short break and you'll find a new player-created rhythm with which to fall in step.

Or, indeed, trip over. Following online fan furore late last year over Mercy's resurrection ability, her kit was reworked to a point where teams without her weren't viable. The recently added life-leeching healer Moira feels well-balanced – but a vocal community is already threatening to grumble her into mediocrity. Outcry ensured one-punch-KO master Doomfist was nerfed so hard that he became useless (and buggy). *Overwatch*'s developers care, and listen, and hurriedly patch. Sometimes, it creates more problems than it solves. God forbid you enter team chat and pick an 'off-meta' character like Doomfist nowadays: toxicity amongst the community is rampant, though Blizzard is fine-tuning a more robust reporting system that, used responsibly, is making an appreciable difference.

You certainly can't expect 35 million people to behave perfectly, and you definitely shouldn't allow them to dictate the rules of a videogame. Then again, so much of *Overwatch*'s personality is down to its players, who have created so rich a lore around their favourite characters that Blizzard has paid homage multiple times: a 'barbecue dad' skin for Soldier 76, a Dorito-chugging 'gremlin' emote for D.Va. It's the players, then, that make *Overwatch* – here's hoping that, as the years roll on, they don't end up breaking it. ■


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February 1



